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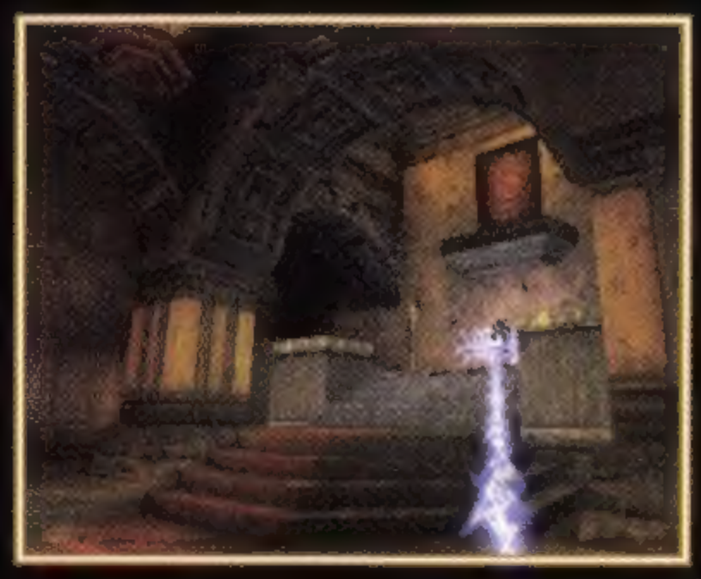

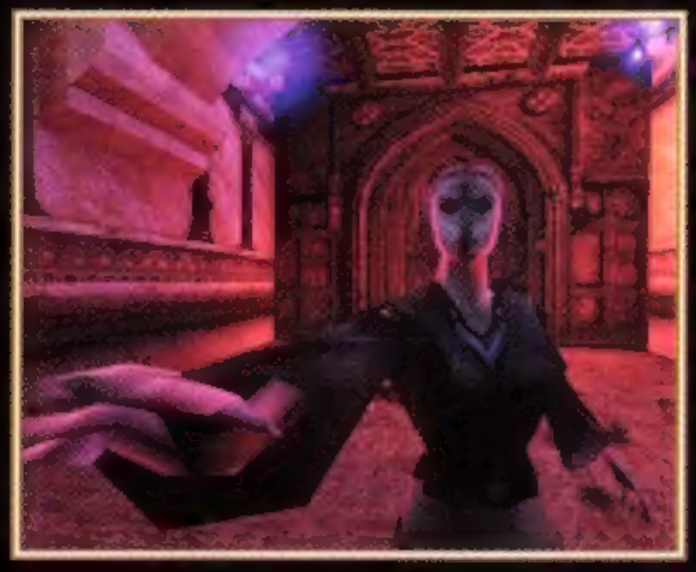

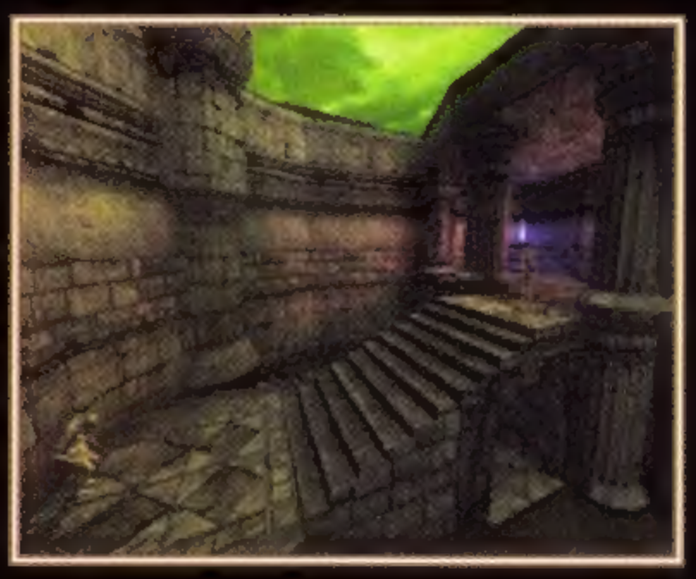

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- Allows individual control of on-screen warriors going far beyond the traditional limits of unit management.
- Historically accurate 3D battlefields, using satellite data to 50 square meters, tests tactical and strategic skills.
- Seamlessly combines real-time gameplay within a turn-based, build an empire world.
- Choose among 16 historically accurate clans in your battle to restore freedom to Scotland.
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LIGHTNING ST

PRAISE
for
Seven Kingdoms

- "If you missed *Seven Kingdoms* last year, you missed the best strategy game in a long time."
  – PC Gamer
  (Review Score: 90%, Recipient: Editor's Choice Award)

- "Like Chan's *Capitalism*, *Seven Kingdoms* is deep, complex, and challenging. ★★★★"
  – Computer Gaming World

- "The detail in *Seven Kingdoms* makes *Age of Empires* look like checkers."
  – GamePower

- "★★★★"
  – Computer Games Strategy Plus

CREATE

CREATE civilizations out of thin air. Choose from 12 nationalities, each with its own unique culture. Construct amazingly detailed buildings, including new military camps, espionage colleges, and special training centers. Each time you play will be a fresh experience, thanks to the new Random Campaign Generator.

GOVERN

Trevor Chan is the creator of advanced strategy games like *Capitalism*, *Seven Kingdoms*, and *Seven Kingdoms Ancient Adversaries*. Although only 25, Chan operates his own game design studio, overseeing all aspects of production at Hong Kong-based Enlight Software (www.enlight.com).

INTERACTIVE MAGIC

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RIKES TWICE!

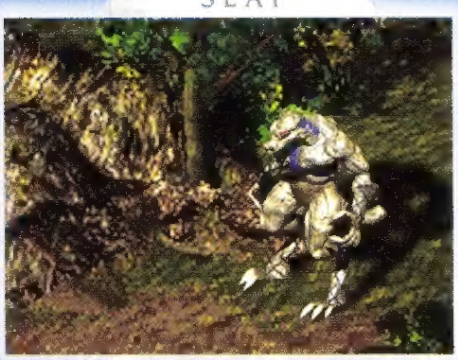
ADVANCE PRAISE
for
Seven Kingdoms II

- "Building upon the success of Interactive Magic's empire-building game *Seven Kingdoms*, Trevor Chan has sought out perfection..."
  – Ultimate PC

- "If you didn't buy *Seven Kingdoms* when it first came out, don't make the same mistake twice."
  – PC Games

- "*Seven Kingdoms II* is shaping up to be everything its predecessor was and more."
  – Imagine Games Network

SLAY



GOVERN your society your way. Micro-manage your resources, establish trade routes and set up diplomatic relationships. Research new technologies and military methods in the Towers of Science. Prepare bold plans of attack, and watch your back with spies trained at your Espionage College. The streamlined interface makes it easy to run your empire.

SLAY monsters, hire them, or become them. 7 horrifying Fryhtans: Unleash their savagery on others, or find yourself as the target of their wrath. New Fryhtan structures include incubators (for producing weapons) and centers for transmitting magic power. Plus: thrilling new Heroes, introducing their own special magic into the game.

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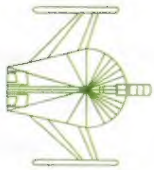
Star Trek®

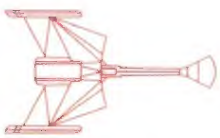


Romulan Battlehawk
Destroyer (R-BH)

4 Phaser 1s
2 Plasma Gs
2 Tractors
1 Transporter
Size Class: 4

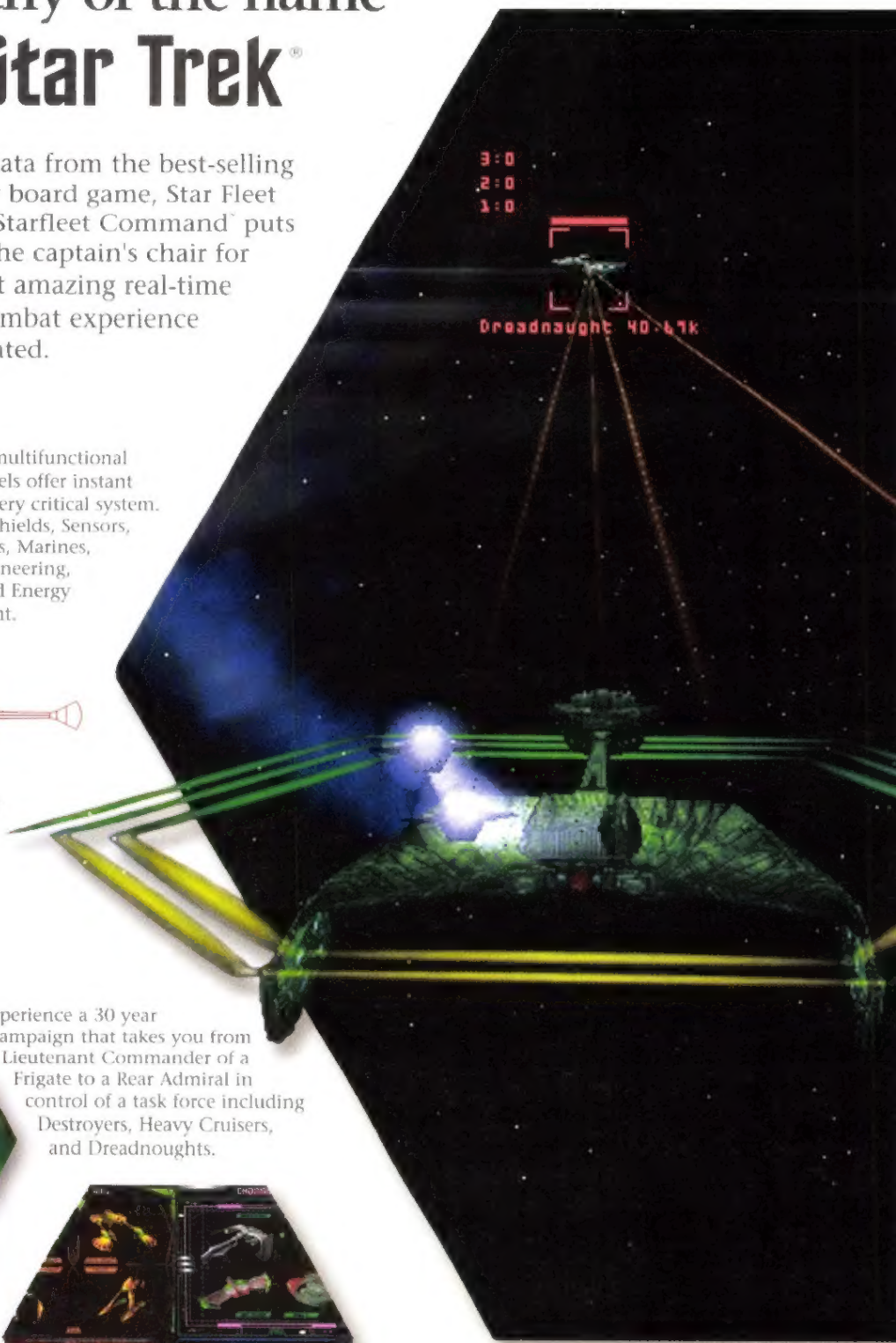
Using data from the best-selling strategy board game, Star Fleet Battles, Starfleet Command puts you in the captain's chair for the most amazing real-time space combat experience ever created.

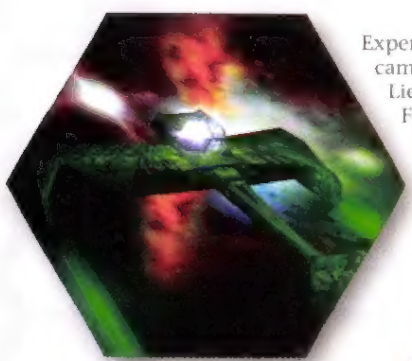
Dozens of multifunctional display panels offer instant access to every critical system. Weapons, Shields, Sensors, Transporters, Marines, Mines, Engineering, Science, and Energy Management.



Klingon Command
Cruiser (K-D7C)

4 Disruptors
3 Phaser 1s
6 Phaser 2s
3 Tractors
6 Transporter
Size Class: 3





Experience a 30 year campaign that takes you from Lieutenant Commander of a Frigate to a Rear Admiral in control of a task force including Destroyers, Heavy Cruisers, and Dreadnoughts.

Every good tactician knows there's a fine balance between speed and raw power. Choose from four classes of ships and over 50 3-D rendered hull designs.

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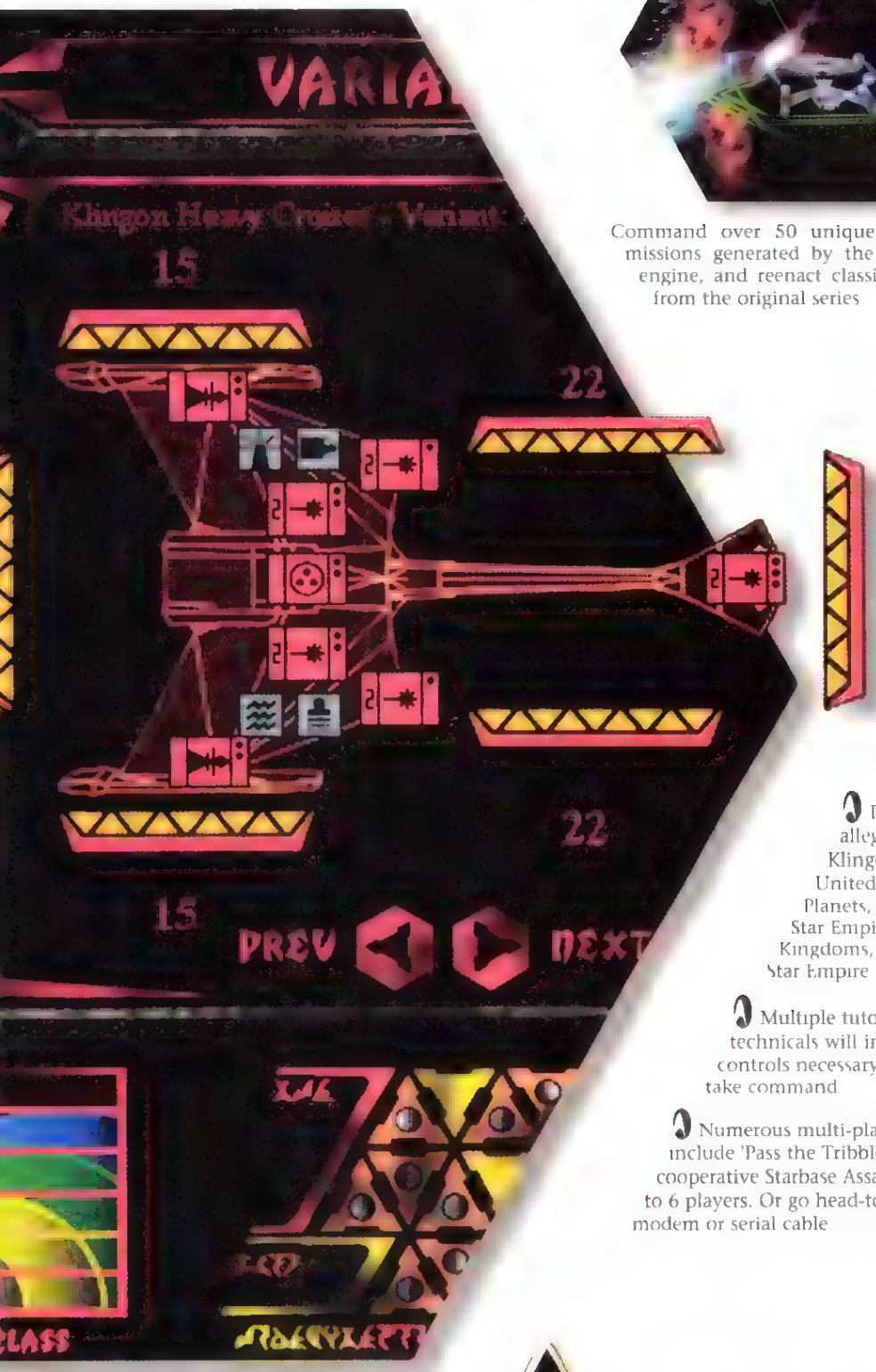
All shots are actual gameplay screens.



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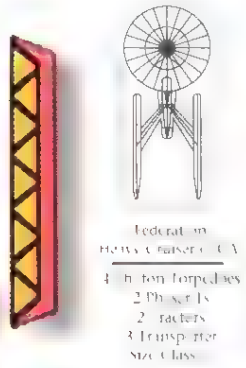

- Pledge allegiance in the Klingon Empire, the United Federation of Planets, the Romulan Star Empire, the Hydran Kingdoms, or the Lyran Star Empire
- Multiple tutorials and technicals will introduce the controls necessary for you to take command
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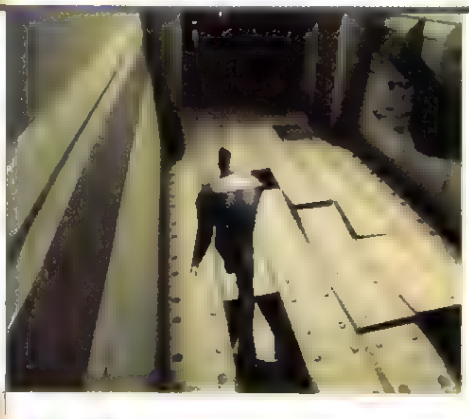

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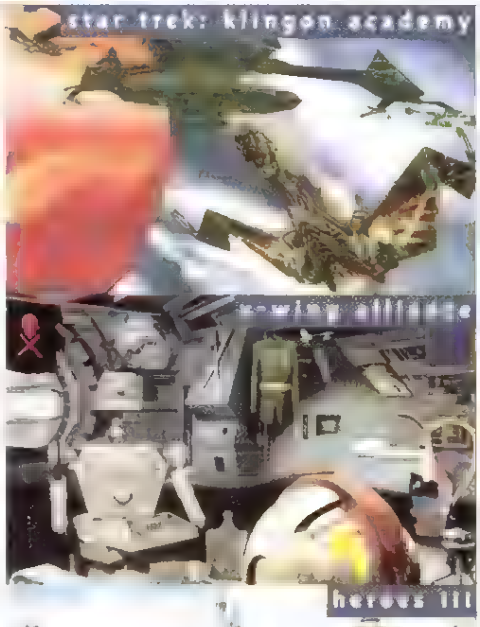

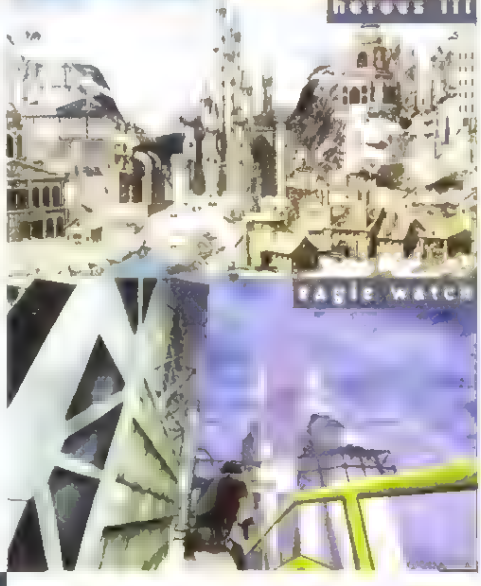

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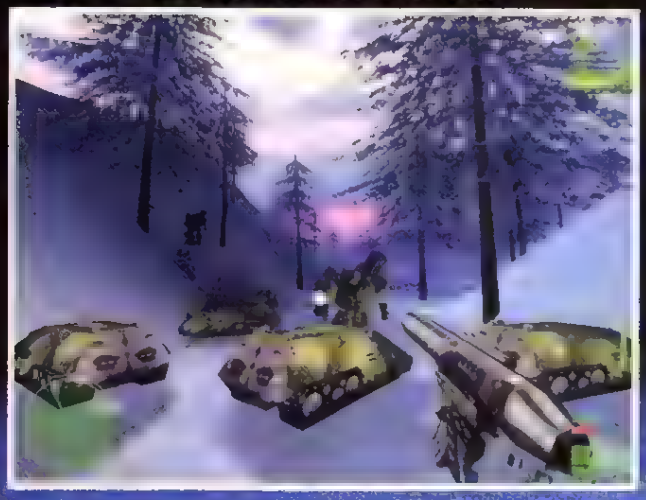

GRITTIER ATTACKS ON INTELLIGENT ENEMY FORCES THAT ADAPT TO YOUR TACTICS.

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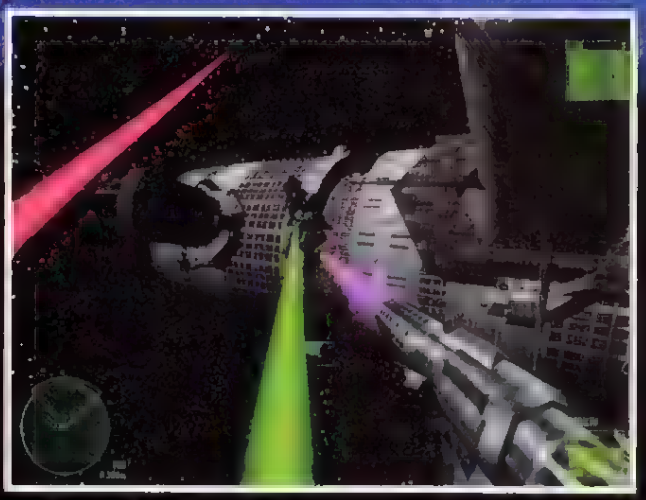

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chris sawyer
PROSE

I am not Satan

Who is that creepy guy in the corner?

by Steve Bauman

Welcome to the new-look *Computer Games Strategy Plus*. We've redesigned the entire magazine from the ground up, and the first thing you may have noticed is... me, lurking ominously in the corner. When you turn the page, you'll also notice my fellow editors—after many years of hiding behind our text, we decided to show our (almost) normal-looking faces. However, rather than use the usual staid photographs, we contracted New York artist Johanna Goodman to produce these unusual caricatures. Her unique works have adorned publications like *Rolling Stone*, *Entertainment Weekly*, and *Sports Illustrated*, to name but a few. She paints with her fingers. How low-tech is that?

Now that you know what I (sorta) look like, I guess I should re-introduce myself. Hi, my name is Steve and while I do resemble that guy up there, he looks more like my evil twin. He's the guy that trashes all of those horrible games that companies insist on dumping on the market in order to secure shelf space for their AAA titles. He's the guy that called *Trespasser* "the most gratuitous example of technological masturbation ever fostered upon the gaming community."

But enough about me. This is really supposed to be about the issue you're holding in your hands.

We've done a number of redesigns over the years, but one thing we've never changed is our commitment to packing as much content per page as we possibly can. With that in mind, we've added a few new user-requested modifications to our existing sections without reducing the number of words per page.

In our review section, which is no longer separated by genres (it's getting too tough to separate them in this manner), we've added a box that contains the games' "Upside" and "Downside." This one-sentence summary of the positive and negative features of the game is something we've resisted implementing because it tends to overshadow the actual review text. Again, we cannot say this enough—the ratings and one-sentence summaries alone are fairly useless without the context the accompanying text provides.

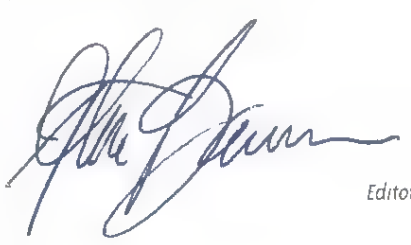
We've done a number of redesigns over the years, but one thing we've never changed is our commitment to packing as much content per page as we possibly can.

Over the years, we've noticed that gamers like to hear other gamers' opinions on games. With that in mind, we've done two additional things. First off, we've added a new section, "The Buzz," to our reviews. In it you'll find the "word on the street," so to speak, about the games, which consists of actual user quotes taken from our online forums at www.cdmag.com. (Well, we do remove the expletives and change them from all caps to a more socially acceptable format—juuuust kidding. The forums are actually fairly civil.) Join in on the online discussions and maybe you'll see your name in one of our future reviews. Impress friends and/or relatives. Maybe it'll even lead to romance. (Magazine groupies are everywhere. Why do you think we do this?)

Second, we've expanded our inexplicably popular "Rebound" section to two pages. So keep sending those serious, not-so-serious and (probably) chemically-enhanced letters to editor@cdmag.com. We read them all, and most receive a response from one of the editors. No, really. Even the really stupid ones. But please folks, and we can't stress this enough. No more letters about wanting to see horny and sexy pictures of [Fill in the Blank] in the next issue. Look at the damage that request has caused—a reminder is staring at you from the upper right corner of this page. It may not be horny, and it certainly ain't sexy (at least in my case), but it is indeed a picture.

A final change we've implemented is the inclusion of links to additional articles on our web site. We've included the full link, which can be a bit... complicated to type in. They are case sensitive, so you may be better off just logging in to www.cdmag.com and going on from there. (A simple search of the game name should turn up what you're specifically looking for.) We'll have links to online demos, hints, and cheat articles and related forum topics.

As with any redesign, we'll likely spend the next few months tweaking the basic formula in order to get it perfect. All of the editorial changes will also go through the same process. In either case, we're depending on your feedback to help direct our efforts. Anything you hate? Anything you love? Any horrible ideas? Any great ideas? Don't hesitate to throw them our way at editor@cdmag.com. Editors are standing by. Even the ones that look like Satan.



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"Sinistar Unleashed is a technical powerhouse of a 3D shooter"
-Voodoo Magazine

I LIVE.

RP

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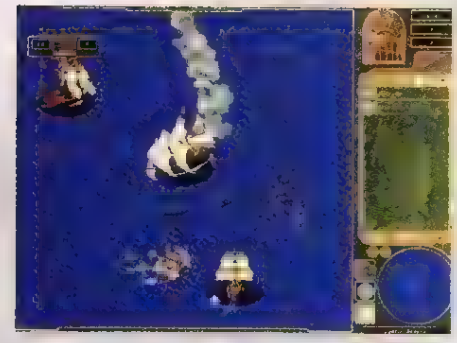

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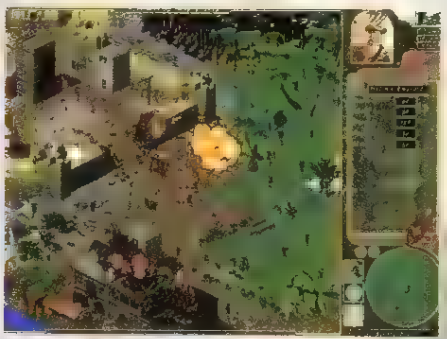

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Easy gaming

Have online gaming networks become irrelevant?

by André Vrignaud

Almost anyone with an interest in 3D Shooters has played *Half-Life* by now, and is likely also aware of *Starsiege Tribes*. And of those of you who have played these titles, I'm willing to bet quite a few have played at least one online multiplayer session. What's more, I'd even be willing to go out on a limb and say that a greater percentage of people have played these titles multiplayer than on average, and for one reason: the hyper-simplification of the online gaming experience.

As most of you are aware, playing online was traditionally quite a pain. You'd first have to get the game (duh), and then figure out what hardware and software combinations it supported. Direct serial link? Modem to modem? IPX? TCP/IP? Once you waded through the alphabet soup, you'd need to figure out what hardware you needed (or needed to emulate). For example, in the case of a traditional "LAN" game (ie, supporting only the IPX protocol), you'd either need a home network, or use a tool like Kali to enable your gameplay experience. Finally, you found yourself at the mercy of fickle ISP gods, and even if you were able to surmount all these issues satisfactorily, you found yourself praying that your friend way off in the backwaters of Oregon was also going to be able to resolve them.

The situation has become much better as time has passed. Most game titles have standardized upon TCP/IP for a networking protocol, which synchs nicely with Microsoft's implementation of the protocol stack into Windows. Programmers have become more sophisticated in their networking implementations, and the net's infrastructure has become more robust and reliable. About the only problem we have anymore is finding someone to play with at the drop of a hat—and games like the above (running through WON.net) have resolved that issue quite elegantly through the addition of one-click gaming. This ease-of-use and simplicity in online gaming has had me pondering a little recently, and although I'm hesitant to state it definitively, I do have to ask, have online gaming networks become irrelevant?

> ***...although I'm hesitant to state it definitively, I do have to ask, have online gaming networks become irrelevant?***

Let's think about it a little. In the past these networks (be they a Kali, GameSpy, TEN, HEAT, or Mplayer) had two roles: to aggregate gamers together to play (the "community" buzzword), and to facilitate gaming between those gamers. Early on there was a definite need for a technology partner to facilitate the technical aspects of online gaming. Kali enabled IPX over WAN (Wide-Area Network, i.e., the Internet) gaming, and networks such as TEN and Mplayer developed proprietary technologies to allow action games like *Duke Nukem 3D* and *Quake* to be played (relatively) well over a standard dial-up. As time has progressed the net has become more reliable, and ISPs have begun to take their responsibilities as reliable access providers more seriously. On top of that, digital access technologies such as ISDN, xDSL, and cable modems have come onto the scene with high bandwidth connections, but even more importantly, low latencies. (Latency is a time measurement, usually in milliseconds, of how long it takes a packet of information from one machine to reach another on the net. The lower the latency, the "tighter" the game can feel as far as responsiveness perceived shot accuracy (I *know* I hit him!), and the like.)

The need for matching players together also seems to be slowly fading, at least from the network's point of view. (And to clarify, I'm not saying the need for Community in games is fading, just the basic matching need.) First off, it seems to me that most people don't *want* to play total strangers; I know I'd much rather get a game together with a bunch of my friends and taunt them all the more effectively for knowing them as I rub their face in the dirt.

Beyond that, many games are now large-scale online titles, games like *Ultima Online*, *EverQuest*, etc. Players don't *need* sophisticated matching technologies to play these. After all, once you're in the world, you're playing. Traditional match-needy games such as 3D Shooters, real-time strategy games, and such also seem to be less dependent on the gaming networks. As mentioned earlier, *Half-Life* and *Starsiege Tribes* have integrated "click-and-play" functionality built within the client, and those games that don't can use inexpensive tools such as GameSpy and Kali. [*And don't forget Bungie.net and Battle.net, for Myth and Blizzard games.—ed.*]

So where does this leave us? Are gaming networks becoming less relevant? Has online gaming finally advanced to the point where it's pretty easy to find someone to play with? Or am I completely off my rocker and most of you are struggling to find people to play against? Let me know! I'm very curious as to your thoughts, and will likely do a follow-up column with your responses.

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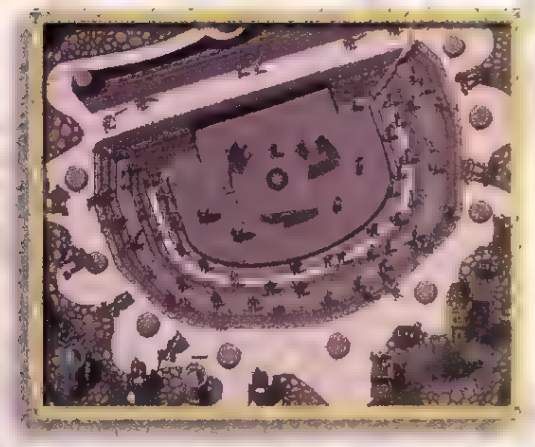

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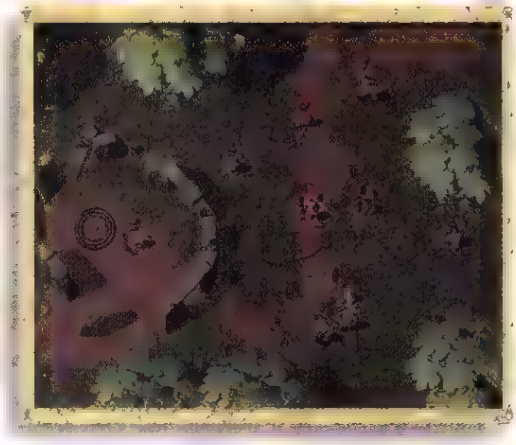

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Who was first?

Will the original RTS game please stand up

by Scott Udell

I've been thinking a lot about the so-called "real-time strategy" sub-genre a lot these days. I don't know why, exactly, except maybe a natural curiosity about where the games are going. Look over last year... and quick, tell me an RTS game that shipped Chances are *StarCraft* jumped to your mind (mine, too). Natural enough, I suppose, for the best selling game of the year (yes, apparently better than the hunting and Barbie games, even better than the hunting Barbie games). I don't know about you, though, but no other RTS games really leap out at me for last year. There were some that were decent enough, I guess (*Populous 3*, for example) and some that tanked (*Dominion Storm*), but none that I can really think of as "hits." Maybe it's that that makes me wonder where the genre's going But prognostication is tough, so I first want to spend some time looking back along the genre's time line, back to it's very roots

Everyone remembers *Command & Conquer* and *Warcraft II*—they were the games that really kicked the RTS genre into high gear. I won't even begin to get into the "better" argument (in part because I don't have a preference—I enjoyed both), but it's perhaps because of this argument that you'll often hear those who think they're "in the know" sniff at claims that these two games started off the RTS revolution, these folks *know* that it was their favorite's predecessor, either *Dune II* or the original *Warcraft* (of course, since these games came out at roughly the same time, the argument begins anew)

The problem, though, is that long-time gamers know that even those games were relative newbies in the "real-time" world For fun, I started up a thread in the *Computer Games Online* strategy forum, the thread is called "Earliest real-time strategy game?", and it was interesting the discuss on that was generated. People went all over the board, including even a few games that were quite decidedly *turn*-based (an indication of attention spans on the 'net?), but over all there were an amazing number of games listed, including some I'd forgotten about

Everyone remembers Command & Conquer and Warcraft II—they were the games that really kicked the RTS genre into high gear. I won't even begin to get into the "better" argument (in part because I don't have a preference—I enjoyed both)...

Let's walk backwards down RTS gaming's memory lane, and examine some of the, in reverse order of publication, that forum posters mentioned *Global Dilemma Guns 'n' Butter* (Mindscape, 1990), *Command HQ* (MicroProse, 1990), *Populous* (Bullfrog, 1988?), *Modem Wars* (Electronic Arts, 1988), *Battalion Commander* (SSI, 1985), *Ancient Art of War* (Broderbund, 1985), *Air Support* (Synapse 1984), *Combat Leader* (SSI, 1984), *Archon* (Electronic Arts, 1983), and *Cytron Masters* (SSI, Dani Bunten, 1982). I intentionally skipped *Railroad Tycoon*, *SimCity*, and *M.U.L.E.*, not because they aren't real-time (well, *M.U.L.E.* is really a hybrid), but because they aren't "RTS" games as the term has come to be defined... specifically, there's no out-and-out combat component to them. I'm not sure about all the games in this list, I've got to admit I've never heard of some of them (or have forgotten them—it has been over 15 years in some cases), and many I haven't played (I was an Atari owner in the early days). Several non-personal computer games were mentioned, too, including *Utopia* on the Mattel Intellivision, *NetTrek* for X-Windows (relatively more recent), and some very old mainframe games, including 1978's *DecWars* (yeah, it was played over print terminals, but it was apparently real time)

While I did play *Archon* first, my own personal earliest "real" RTS game was Synapse's *Air Support*. Coming out in the waning days of that publisher (responsible for such classics as *Shamus*, *Pharaoh's Curse*, *Necromancer*, and one of my all-time favorites, *Blue Max*, a *Zaxxon* clone), it was, in an apparently last-ditch attempt to make money, put on the back of a disk for another game, *Quasimodo*, originally I bought my copy to get *Quasimodo*, as I knew the fellow who wrote that title (An aside as I recall, Synapse imploded soon after, and was bought up by Broderbund, who was bought by The Learning Company, who is now owned by Mattel, maybe we will see an *Air Support* sequel called *Barbie Support*, a product to compete with Maxis' *SimBra*)

In the game you controlled a helicopter, flying it across a vertically scrolling landscape, dodging fire from ground targets and trying to shoot up enemy ground units. Each side had an army, the enemy's goal was to advance into your territory and reach your map edge, and your goal was to stop them. The kicker was, you could order groups of your men around (as I recall, you could even pick them up and drop them off, but I may be wrong), positioning them to react to the enemy's attacks—just like an RTS game. Actually, all this talk of *Uprising* and the new *Battlezone* being such original hybrid games may be bunk—*Air Support* was doing the action/RTS hybrid thing 15 years ago ■

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by Cindy Yans

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Warokilli shows you a shadowy black haversack stitched with sparkling bolts of lightning encircling a bright red fireball. Dancing Dwarves holding mugs of ale cavort along the sides of the haversack and fine stitching, nearly hidden within the fireball reads, 'Mess with the best, die like the rest!'"

These are excerpts from ads on www.onelist.com. For the uninitiated, onelist.com is a mailing list system that allows subscribers to create their own or subscribe to any of about a trillion mailing lists that cover just about any subject you might imagine. The above ads are from a list known as DRSales, which encompasses the posting, selling, and trading of characters, items and art facts from *DragonRealms*, a fantasy, text-based, role-playing adventure game (AKA MUD). All well and good, right? Some ads ask the interested buyer for *DragonRealm* currency—generally platinum (the Dream Pillows sell for one platinum apiece), while others go a bit further and hawk merchandise for actual moolah, semolians, dough, cash, currency. The aforementioned fine haversack can be yours for a mere $500. OK, a sack for that kind of money has to be pretty special, right? Why so much? Well, it seems that this particular sack is rather unique because it is very old, holds unlimited amounts of Greatswords and Longbows, has no limit on items or weight, and has that goofy inscription that newer sacks will never be allowed to have since the language is considered "too modern."

Dwarven Mage Warokilli Vladie asks that you send all bids (apparently the price is negotiable) to his e-mail account. I know the sack is attractive and that you probably won't sleep until you're the proud owner, but wait! Don't fire up that e-mail program quite yet. Instead point your web browser to www.ebay.com. Ebay is "Your Persona Trading Community™"—an online auction house where you can buy and sell stuff relating to, oh, about the same trillion topics as you'll find at onelist. Type "Ultima" at the search engine prompt, and you'll find hundreds of ongoing sales of items, characters, etc. from the *Ultima Online* universe. The primary difference here seems to be real estate.

Ultima Online is the first mainstream online massively multiplayer role-playing game that allows players to actually build and own property—houses, towers, forges, castles—the landscape is now complete littered with buildings. Apparently the zoning committee didn't meet often enough, and there is virtually *nowhere* to place a house anymore, much less a castle. So people who have been playing for several years (and may have even moved on to real lives) are selling their accumulated wealth for what seem to be obscene amounts of real cash. And if you didn't know that the ads are talking about what amounts to colored pixels, you'd swear you were reading out of a Century 21 brochure.

"The assets on this shard [*the particular server on which the player spent way too much time*] are staggering, including a Placed CASTLE (worth over $1,000,000 gold alone), a Placed 2-Story House surrounded on 3 sides by water and loaded with magic weapons and reagents...The account also includes 2 houses currently declared public and hosting vendors—one of which is practically IN the town of Skara Brae, the other is in the well developed player-run town of DeepWater. Both of these get many, many visits and are moneymaking machines." How much? At this writing this property and its accompanying characters are going for $710. Someone actually placed that bid.

Probably the scariest one of all is from one "icyewolf" with the asking price of $5,000. "This might be one of the best character sets created which has virtually extremely rare and high attributes/stats. Great Lakes, the perfect shard for role-players and PKs alike would appreciate this account which comes with 1,000,000 Gold Pieces and a PLACED TOWER and a PLACED 2-STOREY house. .[sic]"

I realize that these sellers view their property as representative of the thousands of hours they spent developing it, which, if they were paid by the hour would certainly be for less than minimum wage, but honestly, isn't buying all that wealth self-defeating? Don't we play for the satisfaction of building it up ourselves? I don't know about you, but for $500 to $5,000, I don't want a sack that I can *read*, or pixels I can see—for that kind of cash, I sure want to be able to hold it, wear it, touch it, or vacation in it. OK, now you're free to place your bids. ■

Some ads ask the interested buyer for DragonRealm currency—generally platinum... while others go a bit further and hawk merchandise for actual moolah, semolians, dough, cash, currency.

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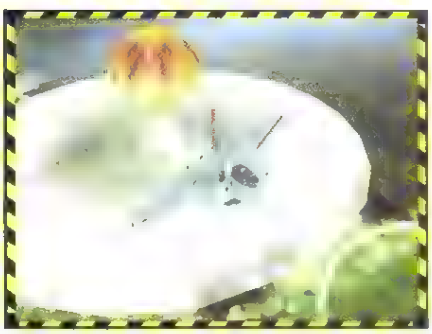

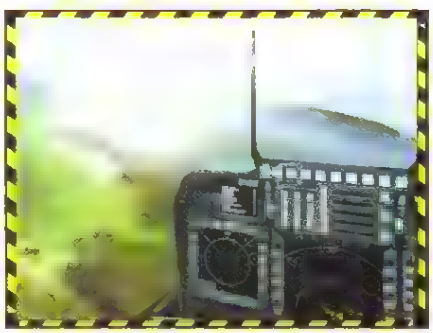

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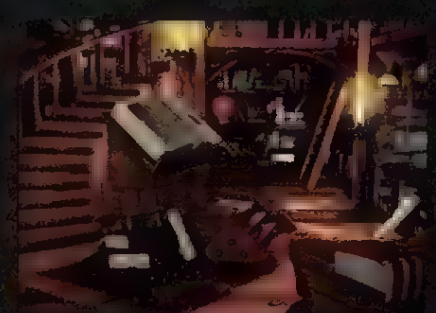

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The last big-budget combat sim

"Simu-wood" follows Hollywood again

by Ben Chiu

During a recent conversation with Jonathan Baron of Kesma (a true poet/philosopher of the sim industry), we went off on a tangent about the future of air combat simulation development. One of the things we speculated on is whether the market will be able to support the current trend towards big-budget air combat sims. [Hold that thought.]

Consider that the best selling air combat simulation to date has only sold in the 400-500 thousand-unit range (and that's over a number of years). More importantly, sales of 150K units in the air combat simulation market is considered to be very good these days. Now factor in that the days of hiring programmers for $30 an hour are gone, development typically takes upward of a year, and the created by "two buddies in the garage" products are probably extinct because the technology/complexity bar has risen so high (but we still love to see that kind of thing). To give you an example of things have changed, when one graphics artist would have sufficed in days gone by, today that job has to be tackled by an art team. As simulations have become more *everything* (realistic, complex, detailed, in-depth, etc.), the cost of development has increased dramatically.

Although air combat sims on average sell for retail in the $35-$50 range, a developer's return is based on the game's wholesale price—minus the cost of manufacturing, shipping, advertising, etc. If you do the math using the 150K-unit sales number (let's not forget that an air combat sim that sells 150K copies or more is considered a success), you'd be justified in wondering how products with several million-dollars of development costs will ever see black ink.

While the sales of Microsoft *Combat Flight Simulator* thus far seems to be the exception to the rule—perhaps that's not so surprising since its lineage comes from Microsoft *Flight Simulator* (which is a sales aberration itself), the design principles these products are based upon are what will allow big-budget air combat products to continue. Just as Hollywood realized this principle and the era of "the sequel" took over, "Simu-wood" followed suit. In order for big-budget air combat products to produce a profit without setting new sales records, sims will have to be designed to be portable, expandable, and/or upgrade-able. The major bulk of development costs has to be spread over a range of products whether they're add-ons, sequels, spin-offs, and/or derivative products. (Of course the real trick is to come up with something worth expanding/upgrading in the first place.)

Jane's Combat Simulations seems to have grasped this concept well. If you've lost count of how many products were based on *USNF* technology no one could blame you. But perhaps the best news of all is the sim industry has quietly expanded beyond the point where "straight-to-shovelware" products by design could survive. We should count ourselves lucky.

On a side note, contrary to popular belief, Kesma's upcoming Vietnam War era centered *Jet Warrior* will be based on its own technology—not on the *Air Warrior* engine. More important, because the air war over Vietnam was so single-sided, it'll be interesting to see how Kesma is going to handle this imbalance to maintain gameplay. Stay tuned. ■

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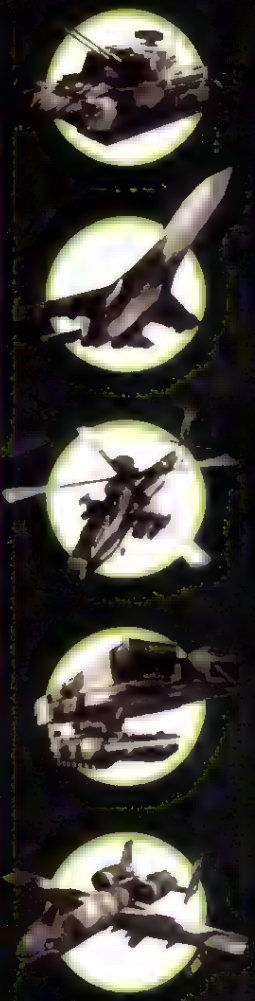
"There is nothing I love as much as a good fight."

–Franklin Delano Roosevelt



A real-time 3-D TACTICAL WARGAME as intense as RAINBOW SIX and war itself.

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The sights, the sounds, and fortunately not the smells from GDC 99

Partying with hardware

At the 1999 Game Developers Conference, hardware and technology was king

EACH YEAR, THE COMPUTER GAME DEVELOPMENT COMMUNITY gathers to network, conference, discuss, and of course go to innumerable parties to score free beer. Unlike the more hectic and much larger Electronic Entertainment Expo, the Game Developers Conference is, as its name implies, much more a real conference, focused on the exchange of information and ideas. While there's a fair amount of hoopla, the heart of the event is the list of professional meetings where programmers, marketers, and publishers discuss the ins and outs of the computer games business. This year's show brought more than 7,000 attendees to San Jose, California.

1999 GDC spotlight awards

Valve Software's Half-Life dominated the 1999 GDC Spotlight Awards, taking top honors in all but one of the categories for which it was nominated. The award winners are:

BEST OF SHOW
Half-Life

BEST PC GAME
Half-Life

BEST ACTION GAME
Half-Life

BEST STRATEGY/WARGAME
StarCraft

BEST SIMULATION
Gran Turismo

BEST ADVENTURE/RPG
Baldur's Gate

BEST CHILDREN'S TITLE
Lego Creator

BEST SPORTS TITLE
NFL Blitz

BEST MULTIPLAYER GAME
StarCraft

PEOPLE'S CHOICE AWARD
Half-Life

BEST USE OF GRAPHICS
Half-Life

BEST USE OF AUDIO
Half-Life

BEST AI
Half-Life

BEST TRIVIA, PUZZLE OR CLASSIC GAME
You Don't Know Jack 4: The Ride

BEST CONSOLE GAME
Legend of Zelda Ocarina of Time

MOST INNOVATIVE GAME DESIGN
Legend of Zelda Ocarina of Time

LIFETIME ACHIEVEMENT AWARD
Louis Castle of Westwood Studios

Most of the show's occupied with conferences ranging from "What's Love got to Do With It?: Exploring Consumers' Emotional Attachments to Products," to "Where the Hell is 3D Shooter Gameplay Going?" Technical issues are also center stage; there were sessions on "Performance Optimizations for PowerVR 2DC (Dreamcast) and PowerVR 250(PC)," and "Optimizing 3D Pipeline Using Streaming SIMD Extension in C++." Make no mistake, this is a professional event, and not a media circus

The hosts of the show like to emphasize the diversity of the exhibitors, attendees, and guests. "This year the GDC Expo truly reflects the diversity of a worldwide community of electronic entertainment providers," noted GDC director Jennifer Pahlka. That diversity was evident at the show—virtually every company with a hand in game technology or development was present Apple had a big presence with their beautiful-looking G3 line of computers (hopefully, we'll be receiving a review unit in the coming months to pit it against an equivalent Pentium II machine), and the conference keynote address was given by none other than Nintendo legend Shigeru Miyamoto, father of Mario, Donkey Kong, and Zelda's Link. His speech, delivered in Japanese (with a translator) in front of a near-packed house, essentially told developers to work more on gameplay than technology

Which was somewhat ironic considering the show itself was mostly dominated by hardware. Take, for example, AMD. Once a bit player in the CPU business, the company now has a legitimate claim to be called a major force in retail computer sales. The company's share in the hot sub-$1000 PC market is even larger. Drew Prairie, Public Relations rep for AMD, said that in

January of this year AMD processors accounted for the ma ority of al CPUs sold in retail PCs in the United States "We're in the lead," says Prairie

At th s year's GDC, AMD focused on two e ements of its product line The ex sting K6 line of CPUs, now up to ts th rd generation, and the forthcom ng K7, a processor aimed squarely at Intel s Pent um III AMD sty es the K7 as a seventh generation CPU (the PIII is a sixth-generation processor), and the spec sheet on the new si icon is indeed mpressive. Debuting at 500MHz (we've seen a 600MHz version running impress vely), the CPU should ship in une and is aimed straight at power users, includ ng gamers. Using a 200MHz Alpha bus, 512kb to 2MB of backside L2 cache, and a P pel ned SuperScalar FPU, the chip's specs read l ke a primer on high-tech d g ta engineering For gamers, what's important are AMD's c aims that the processor will run rings around a nomina y faster-speed Pentium III in rea -world applicat ons

Finally, La Costa, Californ a-based Conducent is bet t ng that money talks Advertising money, that s Formed by a group from Internet powerhouse PSINet in 1996, the company has focused on creating new ways of de iver ng advert s ng in a dynamic and effective fash ion How does this affect gamers? Accord ng to Michae Rothman, Conducent's Director of Content Development, Enterta nment, gamers are one of Conducent s ma n target groups. The dea is to del ver advert sing with n games, whether online or offl ne, n a way that is both effective and unobtrus ve

Of course unobtrusive is n the eyes of the beho der Rothman adm ts that there s some skept c sm among gamers about nsert ng ads nto games, but he's on v nced that advert s ng isn't someth ng gamers should be afra d of In an adventure game for nstance, you might go nto a store and buy brand-name tems instead of generic food and drink n a dr ving game, players would zoom by bi lboards hawking rea products and in a shooter players wou d splatter each other over wa l-textures sel ng anything from m. k to the next great game To keep the ads fresh and re evant Conducent's system can upoate in-game ads whenever the player s on the Internet

Will gamers buy t? Rothman and others th nk so They po nt to the matura on of the gam ng industry, and the rea izat on amongst the pub ic that entertainment has to be payed for Theoret cally, ads could make t poss ble for on ne games to forego the monthly charges usual y associated w th Internet play, and n-game promotions in eading games could encourage companies to continue to develop n che t tles St l., there s a lot of oppos t on to the dea Most of the technica and journalist staff at the GDC whom we contacted were nost le to the concept of in-game ads As Conducent moves to bring this technology to fru tion over the next few yeas we'l be watch ng to see how the gaming com mun ty reacts. —*Robert Mayer*

Daikatana demo, finally

Beleaguered game makes appearance, but only on Mplayer

ON FR DAY, MARCH 12, THE MPLAYER EXCLUSIVE MU.TI-p ayer demo of John Romero's *Daikatana* was f nally released, about a month after it's original announced release and two weeks late for .t's "revised" February release The game, which has gone through a tumultuous development cycle that's we've chronicled in various articles in past months, is still s ated for a Summer release. The 35MB demo, which is on this months CGCD-ROM, features two levels from the first chapter of the game. It is on y p ayable through MPlayer and a regular "open Internet" release is scheduled for this month

Whenever a game receives as much pre-release publ.c-ity as this one, opin ons wil be varied However, nearly everyone doesn't like having to use MPlayer to play the game. Most users state that the weapons aren't bad, but they've al been seen and done before The quality of the leve s is mixed "G bb er on the Roof" doesn't have the sort of wide connectiv ty and m x of open rooms that players crave in deathmatch, but rather a surpris ng number of dead-ends and narrow ha lways The second map, Storm Sector 7, is praised not only for the cool rain effect in the outdoor areas but for the effective des gn and item placement. The game has a faster pace than other first-person shooters of recent v ntage, evok ng memories of the games Romero worked on for id Software, *Doom* and the or g nal *Quake*

Though it's hard not to be critical of a demo release for a game as closely watched as *Daikatana*, it's worth point ng out that the demo sn't necessarily representative of the f nal game. What t does give a good indica-tion of is the quality of the graph cs, and the design decision to deliberately bring back the deathmatch fee of early shooters. This release, along w th the general Internet demo release in a month, also g ves the *Daikatana* team a chance to tweak smal aspects of the game based on player feedback Players wanting a demo that will tell them f they'll like the full game w ll ikely have to wa t a while longer. *Jason Cross*

Player names pop up when you aim at them, and are easier to see than the actual players

The attack rune (lower left) makes the Shotcycler 6 especially deadly

briefs

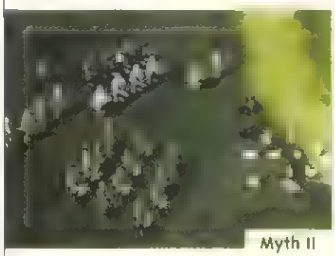
Valve reduces their polygons—Valve Software, creators of *Half-Life* and recipient of innumerable GDC awards (see facing page) announced that they will be using Intel's

Team Fortress 2

Multiresolution Mesh Technology for their upcoming team-based 3D shooter, *Team Fortress 2*. This technology will allow Valve to create a "scaleable" game with models that automatically adjust performance to the gamer's PC. Other games, including Activision's *Dark Reign II*, are also using the technology... **Talk to your games**—Mindmaker, Inc. is creating the *Game Commander*, a system for giving voice commands to games. Yes, you've heard this before, but at least this time no one's claiming that you can play *Quake* by yelling "left! left! left!." Jeffrey Savage, VP for Sales & Marketing for Mindmaker, recognizes the futility of that approach. "The idea is to let you play the game without having to fumble for a host of complex keyboard commands, " he says. The *Game Commander* comes with a noise-canceling headset microphone, and uses voice recognition technology that Savage says is derived from high-end business dictation software. In operation, it's fairly simple: you type in the command you wish to speak, and specify the keystrokes you want to result from your command. The system ships with templates for several more or less popular games, and Savage says many more are available online. Running *Game Commander* in a game like Activision's *MechWarrior: Mercenaries* seems to verify the gist of Mindmaker's claims; the system does recognize voices without training and implements the appropriate commands (look for a review soon). How useful this will prove to be, and how much gamers want such a facility, remain a question. Intriguingly, Savage notes that Mindmaker is actively exploring ways to link Game Commander with real-time voice communication software like Resounding Technology's *Roger Wilco* or ShadowFactor's *BattleCom*. That, if it's actually, possible, could be something of interest to gamers looking for a more real-world feel in >>>

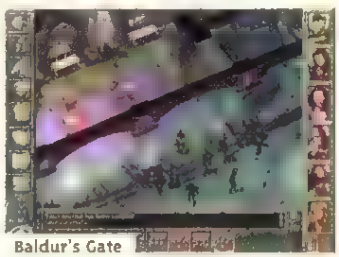
briefs

>>> their online gaming... Intel ships new Celeron—Intel announced the Celeron 433 MHz processor, the fastest value added Intel processor to date. Celeron processors now come in 433, 400, 366, and 333 MHz speeds—all with 128 KB of integrated Level 2 cache on the processor core. In 1,000-unit quantities, the Celeron 433MHz processor in Plastic Pin Grid Array (PPGA) packaging is $169, and the Single Edge Processor Package (SEPP) version is $177... Bungie's Reiger goes to hell—Jason Regier, lead programmer on Bungie's *Myth II* will be leaving the company to work



Myth II

at Blizzard North, where he will immediately begin working on *Diablo 2*. Regier served as lead programmer on Bungie's recently released strategy game *Myth II: Soulblighter*, and on the original *Myth* as Senior Programmer. Regier was responsible for the internal tools for the game as well as some AI scripting. The parting was amicable... Roger Wilco, Baldur's Gate—Resounding Technology, Inc. announced that it's real-time Internet voice communications software *Roger Wilco* will be part of Interplay's



Baldur's Gate

next *Baldur's Gate* product, an expansion disk. The company also announced the availability of a new developer toolkit for integrating their system into online games. *Roger Wilco* is currently available in beta form as a free download from www.rogerwilco.com. A commercial version, expected to sell for less than $25, is expected this spring. The system allows gamers who have a microphone and headphones or speakers to communicate by voice with other gamers. According to Resounding Technology, *Roger Wilco* supports up to 128 players per channel... Sid Meier inducted into AIAS Hall of Fame—The Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences (AIAS), announced that Sid Meier, creator >>>

Legend of the Blade Master

When four genres wrestle, who's on top?

ABOUT FIVE YEARS AGO, SOME JEDI KNIGHTS FROM LUCASARTS dared to strike out on their own and formed Ronin Entertainment. "Ronin" means Masterless Samurai, and these particular Samurai were determined to walk away from their Masters to "fight for the good in life." Hamilton Fong, Kalan Streicher and Edward Kilham, no strangers to game development, have since worked on titles like *Mechwarrior 2: Mercenaries*, *Soldier of Fortune*, *Armor Command*, and *Star Wars Force Commander*. Their current endeavor is *Legend of the BladeMasters* which they are calling "a real-time 3D Action-Adventure fused with RPG and Strategy elements." (Here we go again.)

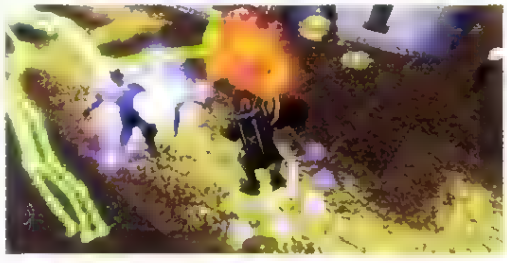
The dragons that used to protect the gameworld's requisite kingdom have been driven out by jealousy and betrayal. With these gatekeepers gone, disgusting creepies have begun to crawl in. Five Guardians are trying to find something undisclosed, and are leaving war and ruin in their wake. You control young Erik Valdemar, hero, lost in the woods—but not for long. You and up to two companions will strive to harness weaponry magic and become BladeMasters, and hence, save the kingdom from mass destruction.

Characters are modeled between 300-500 polygons then animated almost entirely as single skin meshes. You will view the characters from a third person perspective with a camera that centers on the selected character. The game will also utilize Direct3D and support a wide variety of 3D accelerator cards.

Conceptual director Fong feels ambitious saying, "We really try to keep a feel of consistency and quality to everything, without reminding the player that he is playing a game. For instance, the story is built around characters whose personalities and place in the world are dispatched quickly and cleanly, so that the player gets just enough to have a direction and to believe in the mystery unfolding around him. We want to keep the player hungry for the next short and sweet cut-scene or plot point, while he spends most of his time battling customising and strategizing like any good RPG."

Let's hope he's right when the game emerges this winter. —*Cindy Yans*

Methinks thou speaketh with light-saber tongue



Dynamic lighting enhances magic weapon effects

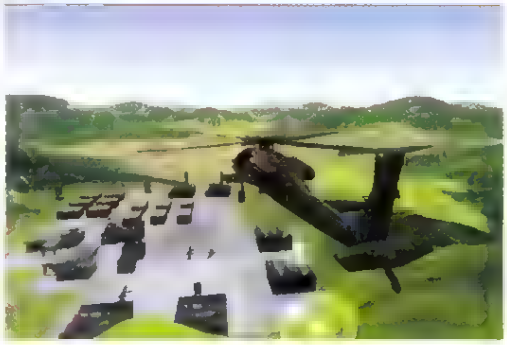
Maximum Overkill

NovaLogic brings gamers air and ground combat, oh my!

THIS SUMMER THE CREATORS OF THE WIDELY PRAISED *Delta Force* are set to deliver their latest voxel-based game, this one dubbed *Maximum Overkill*. If that sounds familiar, you may remember it as the subtitle of NovaLogic's original *Comanche* game. The name of the game is "somewhat realistic future combat," and in concept it sounds a bit like D-D's *Wargasm*, which was released earlier this year.

The action takes place in a near-future environment (well, for some people 50 years is "near" future), and the world has conveniently split in half. The two sides, the New Reforms Coalition (NRC) and the Alliance of Independent Republics (AIR), are fighting for control of the world's resources, and players get to choose sides.

Kill your friends and neighbors with tanks and copters



These early shots show off the latest Voxel Space technology

Players will be allowed to control various air and land combat vehicles (10 in all) as they try to blow each other up. The game will include 40 single-player missions and support up to 32 players via their NovaWorld online service. While the emphasis is on action, NovaLogic is touting some strategic play—each side has a base with separate buildings that have specific functions, allowing you to choose more strategic targets.

Technology wise, *Maximum Overkill* will utilize the latest version of NovaLogic's Voxel Space technology. As it did for Delta Force, it supports 32-bit color graphics. New for this version are more realistic shazing and inversion layers, allowing proper fogging in valleys.

In a prepared statement, Maza, the producer of the game, said, "This will be an amazing addition to NovaLogic's multiplayer gameplay. *Maximum Overkill* encourages players to execute a wider range of tactical options as they interact with the challenge presented by fully functioning bases." —*Steve Bauman*

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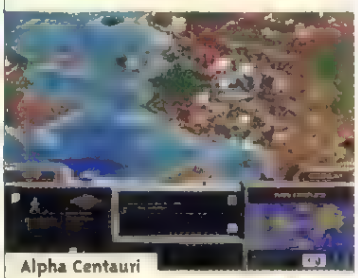
briefs

>>> of such highly acclaimed computer games as *Civilization*, *Gettysburg* and the recently released *Alpha Centauri*, has been chosen as this year's recipient of the Academy's Hall of Fame award. Meier will receive the award at the annual Interactive Achievement Awards, which will take place on May 13, on the first evening of the Electronic Entertainment Expo in Los Angeles, California. "I am honored to be selected as the recipient of this year's Academy of Interactive Arts and Sciences Hall of Fame award, said Meier, Chairman and Director of Creative Development at Firaxis Games. "The AIAS awards serve as confirmation of how far we've come as



Alpha Centauri

an industry. They encourage us to challenge ourselves to create new software that is both entertaining and inspiring."... **Infogrames eats Gremlin**—Infogrames Entertainment has made an offer to acquire Gremlin Group Plc, a major sports video game publisher listed on the London Stock Exchange, in a deal valued at more than $40 million... **Canopus outta here**—Canopus announced that they will no longer manufacture and market graphic cards. The company cited the short life span of graphics cards, along with a change in venue as key reasons for the departure from creating graphics card products. A portion of the official statement below sums up the company's reasoning behind the decision... **Mac gets some new toys**—Logitech announced that it will support the Apple Macintosh as a gaming platform with new peripherals. Beginning with the WingMan Gaming Mouse scheduled to ship in May, Logitech will provide Macintosh support for many of its game devices. They will all be USB devices, and be compatible on both the Mac and the PC. In other Mac news, Simon & Schuster Interactive has shipped a Mac version of *Starship Titanic*, the adventure game created by *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* author Douglas Adams... ■

Warlords Battlecry

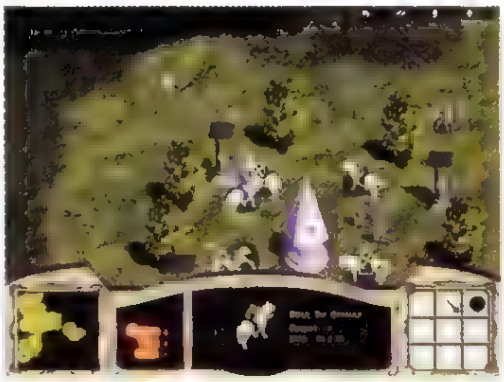
Warlords goes—gasp!—real-time

WELL, YOU'VE GOT TO FIGURE THAT IT WOULD HAPPEN sometime the much beloved Warlords fantasy strategy franchise is coming out with a real-time game Don't worry! While *Warlords Battlecry* is a working title, it's not being called *Warlords IV*. Representatives from Red Orb won't rule out a fourth turn-based title, so it looks like Battlecry is more of an off-shoot than a replacement

Of course, it is a *Warlords* product, so when you study Red Orb's laundry list of features, a lot looks very familiar nine distinct races, different hero races and 16 hero classes, a variety of victory conditions for both single and multiplayer, and a story-based campaign, divided into six "chapters," that follows the path of either the good side or the bad. As introduced into *Warlords III*, heroes will retain characteristics from scenario to scenario, and may choose to retain their armies SSG has been known for its strong AI (at least on non-random maps), and Red Orb is promising that it'll be present in *Battlecry* too (it will be interesting to see how SSG adapts their AI to a real-time environment)

The magic system is being revamped, with magiks being broken into eight different "spheres" and over 80 spells. You'll still conquer territory, and resources like crystals, metal, stone, and gold are gathered automatically as you take that new land, leaving you to focus on the combat The combat, of course, is quite different whereas previous *Warlords* games had almost a strategic feel, with little player involvement in the tactical clashes of army "stacks," *Battlecry* will put you right down there in the mud with your troops both magical and mundane To ease your burden, the will sport a number of standard formation orders, so armies in battle should look like armies not mobs

The Sirians are back... and they're bad! A very new take with some familiar character

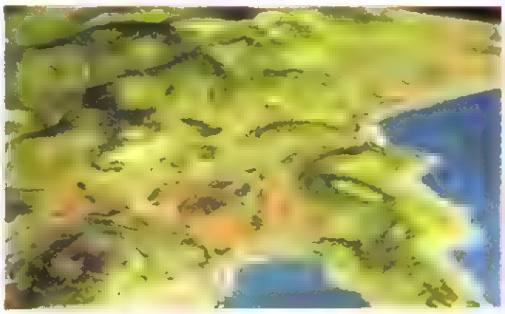


Battle is joined. Note the small overview map—some things never change

As is common with such games, this one's due out as the Fall reaches its peak, expect it to ship to a shoppe near you sometime in October —*Scott Udell*

Panzer General III Assault

An old friend gets a major facelift



When looking at this zoomed-out view, "Panzer General" probably isn't the first thing that comes to mind

A GAME WE FIRST SAW "UNDER WRAPS" LAST FALL, *PANZER General III* Assault has finally had it's official coming out during SSI's quarterly visit to our offices. Most folks remember the hoopla generated by the original Panzer General—a mass-market wargame?! -and some of you may recall the less-than-enthusiastic response to the next generation series kicked off by *Panzer General II* That new series (which is a whole 2-3 games long, depending on what you include) wasn't bad, per se, it just wasn't much different in overall feel

Perhaps because of this, the team developing Assault has implemented some major changes to the "General" style of play Don't worry, it hasn't become *Panzer General* meets *Battlezone*; it's still turn-based, and you move your units across a map that, underneath it all, still uses a hexagon grid. Ah, but the "it all" is the key to one of the major changes, specifically visual. You see *Assault* brings the *General* family into true 3D, a move that SSI says ".. allows for more true to life line-of-sight [and] fog of war." As you can see from the screenshot, this looks nothing like *Panzer General* of yore. (An aside the system uses the same 3D engine as the upcoming *Prince of Persia 3D*)

However, a 3D *General* game would just be a prettier face on the same ol' game, and that would be just a repeat of the "problem" of *Panzer General II*. So, the team's gone in and reworked the gameplay as well as the visuals Whereas earlier *General* games focuses on units, Assault focuses on leaders Each leader commands a particular type of unit (they'll have strengths and weaknesses too), and works under an "Action System"· the better leaders can issue more orders to their units in a turn, so will be valuable on the WW II West Front battlefields the game portrays You'll have a limit, though, on the total amount of "action" in a turn, so as commanding general it'll be up to you to decide: many low quality "slow" leaders, or a few that can do a lot? You'll get a chance to chose your strategy when the game ships this September. --*Scott Udell*

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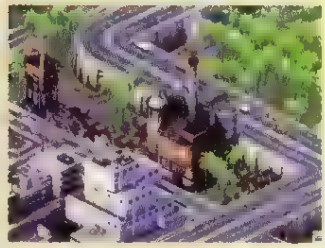

SimCity 3000

Turn based strategy games don't sell anymore...

It comes as no surprise that *SimCity 3000* is dominating the charts. It's a terrific game, and previous versions have sold billions of copies (or at least a few million). What is interesting, aside from the continued success of that "real RPG" *Baldur's Gate*, is *Alpha Centauri*'s strong showing. No one does turn-based strategy games because "they don't sell," yet here's a solid, serious, beyond hardcore turn-based game at number two. To some extent, having "Sid Meier" on the box helps, but *Alpha Centauri* seems to be doing considerably better than his previous game, *Gettysburg*. One final thought: Who in the hell is still buying *Microsoft Flight Simulator*?

1	SIMCITY 3000 Electronic Arts Last Month: 9	$39
2	ALPHA CENTAURI Electronic Arts Last Month: *	$41
3	BALDUR'S GATE Interplay Last Month: 1	$45
4	HALF-LIFE Havas Interactive Last Month: 5	$38
5	BIG GAME HUNTER 2 Activision Last Month: 4	$19
6	DEER HUNTER II 3D GT Interactive Last Month: 3	$19
7	BROOD WAR Havas Interactive Last Month: 2	$27
8	STARCRAFT Havas Interactive Last Month: 6	$50
9	DEER AVENGER Havas Interactive Last Month: 11	$18
10	FLIGHT SIMULATOR Microsoft Last Month: 8	$50

Source: PC Data, Reston, Virginia. Month of February 1999

Werewolf: The Apocalypse

DreamForge claws White Wolf's children of darkness

When Raventongue swings his klaive, duck

WHEN WHITE WOLF, INC. BURST INTO THE PEN-AND-PAPER roleplaying world back in 1991, it didn't take them long to leap into the number two spot in the industry. It's interesting that, in the same year, two high-profile titles based on White Wolf products have hit the scene at the same time—Activision's *Vampire The Masquerade*, and ASC Games' *Werewolf: The Apocalypse—The Heart of Gaia*.

Werewolf is an action-role-playing hybrid (probably in that order) currently in development by DreamForge Intertainment, creators of last year's highly acclaimed *Sanitarium*. You play young punker Ryan McCullough, who, during an adolescent gene spurt finds out that he is Garou—the "proper" term for the ancient lineage of werewolves. Far from *Teen Wolf*-esque, this game represents the Garou as somewhat tragic heroes in a very dark and grotesque world. It is the world of Gaia, the Garou's word for the Mother—the sum of all creation. "All that you see here is Gaia, the Earth, the Sun, the stars the worlds, both here and in the Umbra, all are of Gaia...even the Weaver, the Wyld, and the Wyrm." The latter encompasses all that is evil in the *Werewolf* universe, and our hero finds that he is inevitably drawn toward the genocidal machinations of the Wyrm. Many before him have turned toward it, and startling truths about McCullough's lineage are soon revealed.

Using the more-licenses-than-you-can-shake-a-stick-at *Unreal* engine, *Werewolf* is a level based action game that hopes to give us more story than we're used to seeing in today's hybrids. Probably the most imposing thing that sets it apart from the rest is that your character morphs between three states of Garou-dom, but *Lands of Lore 2*-phobes needn't worry; here you choose when the morphing happens. The gamestory situations will dictate which is the best form in which to solve a particular problem, and in the multiplayer game, all sorts of possibilities are introduced—the smaller four-legged creatures are very fast and fit in many places that their counterparts cannot. However, they cannot hold a weapon.

The game should hit store shelves late this year, and we'll bring you more on this chilling tail from the warped but wonderful folks at DreamForge. *—Cindy Yans*

USAF and World War

"Survey sim" to help roll-out online system

ACCORDING TO JANE'S COMBAT SIMULATIONS, A "SURVEY sim" is one that "surveys" a selection of planes, none are modeled in the extreme detail of, say, *Longbow 2* or *F-15*, but they do generally represent a great cross section of planes. Examples of survey sims include *U.S. Navy Fighters* and *Israeli Air Force*.

USAF is being designed by Pixel Multimedia, the same team that developed *IAF*. Jane's assures us that complaints against *IAF*—primarily centered upon the shimmering ground graphics—have been addressed. *USAF* will cover that august organization, letting you fly eight of its jets from the last 35 years: the F-105, F-4E, F-15C/E, F-117, F-16, A-10, and F-22. You'll fly and fight in a variety of locales and eras; for those with a historical bent, go downtown over Vietnam or Iraq, zip down the Grand Canyon in the present day U.S., or return to Europe for a hypothetical, "semi-dynamic" campaign over Germany—in all, some 62 missions.

The game will run in resolutions up to 1280x1024, and each aircraft will have a full 3D virtual cockpit. Mission recording and playback will be implemented, and an *extensive* career tracking is planned. You'll be able to play with up to eight players on the existing JanesCombat.Net system, or work your way up to *World War*, Jane's new multi-player, multi-product (eventually), dynamic, persistent online world. Eventually the system will grow to include any new Jane's release, be it fixed-wing, rotary wing, submarine, or tank. For *USAF* players, *World War* will offer what Jane's calls "a dynamic virtual war" for up to 120 players per war zone. In a battle, all planes will be flown by human pilots, while other objects are run by the server, which also generates and manages the battles. You can join a battle as a member of a squadron or jump in as a solo pilot, but you will be placed on one side or another. You can work with others on planning offensives, or wait on alert and scramble when something comes up (remember, unlike *USAF* alone, *USAF*-on-World War is fully dynamic). *—Scott Udell*

The USAF interface to Jane's World War (notice the geographic setting-different from that included in the base game)

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In stores August 1999

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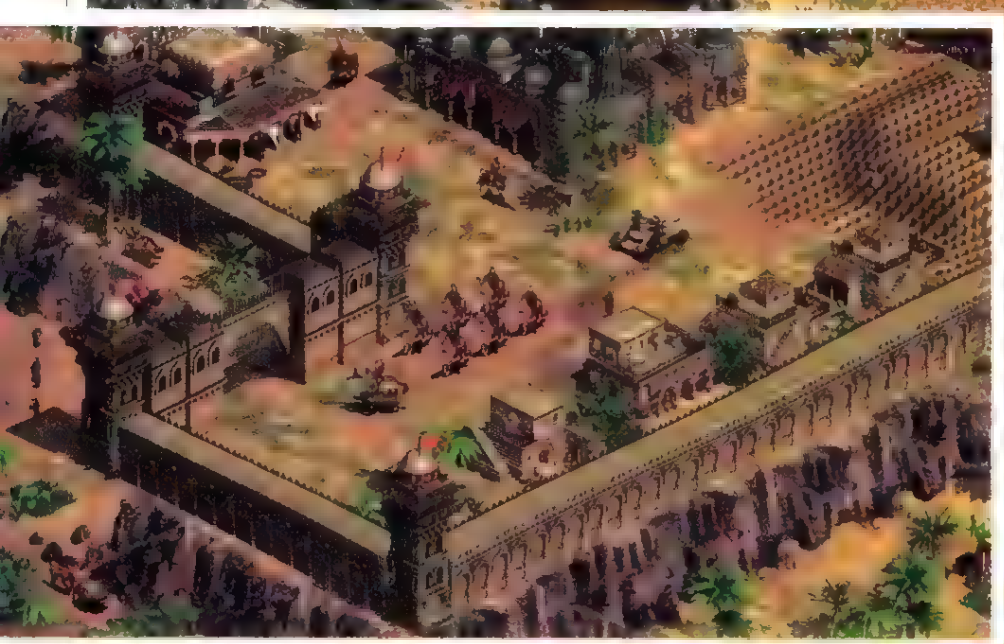
It's Good To Be King

Microsoft takes Age of Empires into the Age of Kings



Right

by Steve Bauman

The rumors of an impending war started sometime in the middle of '97. Small skirmishes were fought, and it appeared the Great War could be avoided. Alas, this was not to be, and in August of '98, the first shots were fired. Pretty soon there were three combatants and it started to get ugly.

The battle was ferocious, and it was fought in that most dank and wretched arena, your local software store. One victor emerged unscathed from the great Real-Time Strategy War of 1998: Age of Empires, vanquishing Dark Reign and Total Annihilation. While you can argue endlessly over which game was actually superior (and people do), it soundly defeated its competition in terms of overall sales, shipping over two million copies since that fated day in 1997.

Jump ahead to 1999, and it appears that all three games are headed for the battlefield once again. After an abortive start that would have seen it reach shelves at the end of 1998, Age of Empires II: The Age of Kings is poised to land on store shelves this Fall. And wouldn't you know it—Total Annihilation Kingdoms, which we covered in our March issue, is scheduled to appear a couple of months earlier, with Dark Reign II slotting in later in the year. It's the great RTS War, round two.

Two things of note in this picture. One are the farms on hilly terrain, and the selected formation being rotated via a simple command

[inset] Sending your cavalry off to battle. Watch out for the gates—they can crush your units

Age of Sequels

The core gameplay of *Age of Kings* remains the same as its prequel. It still follows the standard real-time strategy protocol established by (take your pick) *Dune II*, *Command & Conquer*, and/or *Warcraft*. Using a simple point-and-click interface, you usually start with a handful of units, build a base or town, collect resources, research new technologies, explore the map, produce units of (slightly less than) mass destruction, discover other civilizations and then kill them. Repeat *ad infinitum*.

The game pretty much picks up where the add-on *The Rise of Rome* left off. It covers roughly a thousand years, from the fall of Rome to the Middle Ages. You'll be able to take command of any of 13 different civilizations, each possessing one unique unit (and a lot more that are shared). They include: British, Byzantine, Celtic, Chinese, French, German, Goth, Japanese, Mongol, Saracen, Turkish, Persian and Viking. New campaigns will be more story-based, allowing you to track historical figures like Joan of Arc, William Wallace, and Genghis Khan.

Like all sequels, the designer of *Age of Kings* are faced with a basic dilemma: what do we add, what do we change and what do we keep? Exacerbating that problem is the original game's emergence as a more mass-market type of product. This introduces a new problem—the usual sequel paradigm of "more, more, more"—more features, more control, more stuff to play with—runs the risk of alienating those casual gamers. They may find "more" to be synonymous with "too complex."

Because of their greater numbers, it would be very easy to just try to appeal to the "casual" gamer. It would also be a mistake, at least from the perspective of Bruce Shelley, the Senior Designer at *Age of Empires* developer Ensemble Studios. He thinks both the casual and the hardcore markets are equally important.

"The hardcore creates a lot of the buzz and do a lot of the word-of-mouth advertising," he says, "but at the same time the casual gamers are the big bulk of your sales. The challenge is to make the game interesting to both groups. The risk you run, and you see this with simulations, is when you move your game so much into the hardcore area you lose the casual gamers."

Age of (Subtle) Changes

With that in mind, many of the changes implemented by Ensemble for *Age of Kings* are subtle. For casual gamers, Ensemble is making the game even easier to get into, something that improves what Shelley feels is the most important part of any game experience: the first 15 minutes of play. A new and improved pop-up help system, which can be turned off, can overlay more information about what certain buildings and units do, and what their advantages are. They're not standard tool tips—the text appears immediately on the bottom part of the map screen. The whole technology tree is also accessible from within the game, and it will tell you exactly what path your research needs to take in order to access that technology.

A number of other changes have been implemented. Casual gamers may have wondered how the all-male civilizations in the original game were able to survive, but now they'll notice female villagers milling about. Production queues have already been implemented, allowing you to build consecutive units without being forced to repeatedly request them. You can garrison units in certain buildings, increasing their offensive and defensive capabilities. You can also set the aggression level of individual units and give them certain simple commands: guard, patrol, or follow. Units will still do only what you tell them—if you say "attack this wall" and they're being bombarded by a nearby archer, they will not break away and attack the archer.

Age of (Less-Subtle) Changes

Early screenshots of the original *Age of Empires* showed legions standing in formation, ready for battle. Some gamers were dismayed to find that there were no actual formations in the game, and due to problems with pathfinding, coordinating an organized mass-attack was next to impossible.

Ensemble plans to address both of these issues in *Age of Kings*. Already implemented in the version of the game used for this article, formations add a lot of strategy to the title. Designer Mark Terrano uses an example of your opponent breaching a wall, and you sending units over and selecting a "line" formation to keep the units from entering your town center.

In an example of delivering a hardcore feature that's more accessible to casual gamers, you can micromanage formations to your heart's content, selecting from a series of pre-designed ones (line, arrow, etc.). However, grouped units will automatically fall into simple and logical formations. For example, if you lasso some pikemen, cavalry and archers and send them across the map, the cavalry will move to the front and the archers to the rear without any user intervention. The grouped units all move at the speed of the slowest unit (removing that slow unit will cause the entire group to speed up on-the-fly) and, at least at this point in development, the pathfinding seems to keep them in formation regardless of the terrain.

Ah, pathfinding, those little algorithms that decide whether your unit goes from point A to point B in the shortest distance possible, via the scenic route around a bunch of mountains and trees, or whether it rotates in place like a hound dog with a tail-chasing fetish. Many complaints centered around the original *Age of Empires* focused on its pathing routines.

"I think we underestimated how difficult pathing would be with a random map," admits Terrano. "Units only have a few milliseconds to figure out 'where am I going and how do I stay with my group?'" For *Age of Kings*, pathing is being rewritten from the ground up, in three phases: short path, which handles pathing within formations and what the villagers do most of the time, medium, and long path.

Terrano seems pleased with the results. "[The

Some of the wonders are still enormous

pathing AI) is much smarter about how units move through each other and how they fight and how they get around the map. All the frustrating things are gone."

One feature that was implemented but then removed for better playability was facing damage, where units take more or less damage depending on the direction of the attack (sneaking up from behind or flanking from the side does more, yadda yadda yadda). "We put it in on individual units, tried it and played around with it, but you didn't feel like you could ever tell what was going on," says Terrano. Even though you knew your flank was being hit, it didn't really add to the fun of the game and made it less intuitive." According to Shelley, it was more information than the player could absorb. "The player's brain is one of the resources we have to work with, and it was just beyond anyone's ability to understand and see and recognize there was something meaningful happening there. There're just too many other things already going on."

Chalk that up to the game being in real-time as opposed to turn-based. Sheley, whose previous designs were primarily turn-based, doesn't see this as a problem. "What's cool about real-time strategy is that there's always something to do. You've already got a lot of things to deal with, and deciding what to do next is interesting." Regarding facing, he said, "Facing added a whole new layer of things to consider that just didn't add any interesting decisions to the game."

Age of Intelligence

"Our new strategic AI is so much more challenging than the one in the original game; it's incredible," boasts Terrano. He says their AI still doesn't cheat in the sense that it has to scout the map and doesn't have any information the player doesn't have. However, on the hardest skill level, it still has extra resources (which is documented).

The AI exists in user-modifiable scripts, and if you're interested in skirmishes with the computer you can assign opponents different profiles. Some will build early and attack later while others will go all-out on the offensive. Much like *Civilization*, they will be assigned to historical figures that are known for that style of attack.

Age of Technology

Unlike other sequels, Ensemble is going the *StarCraft* route and not moving into 3D. With nary a 3D accelerated polygon in sight, *Age of Kings* remains a 2D sprite-based game running in 256 colors (believe it or not). While there will no doubt be a contingent of (usually vocal) people that will criticize the game's supposedly "dated" technology, Sheiley points to the screen and said, "What's the problem with doing more games that look like this? This is beautiful."

And he's absolutely correct. While even Sheley concedes that 3D is in Ensemble's future, they're not ready to forsake their level of detail for things like dynamic lighting, modifiable terrain and rotating cameras. But he is somewhat worried. "There's the 'keeping up with the Jones' attitude—if we're the only company producing games in this old format, how is that going to affect the public's opinion of our games?"

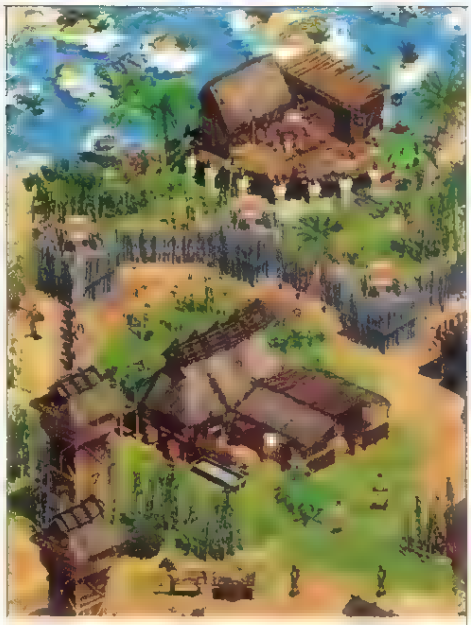
Consider this, though, looking at the best seller lists, two of the biggest sellers in 1998 were 2D sprite-based games: *StarCraft* and the original *Age of Empires*.

Age of Delays

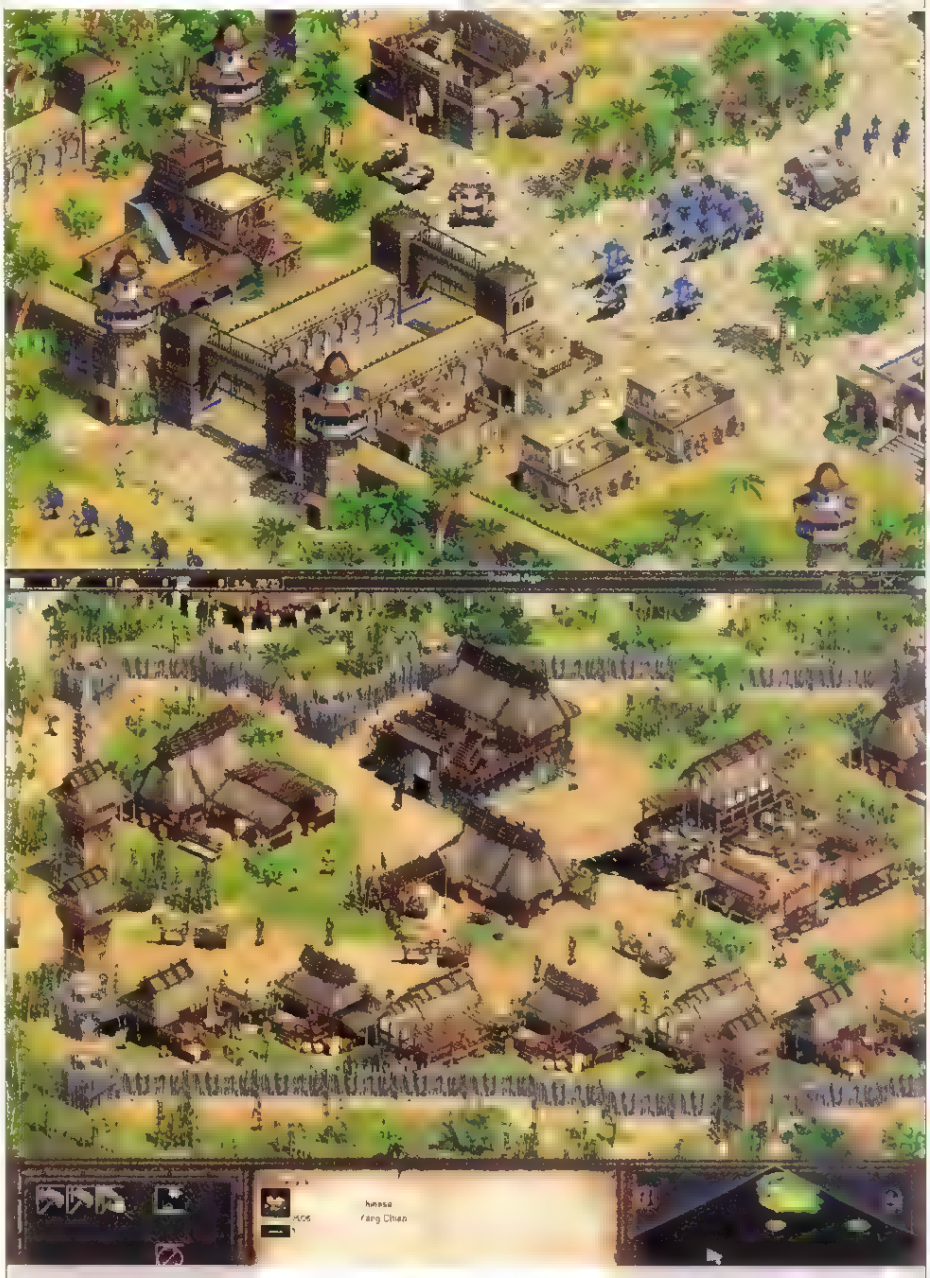
Of all publishers, Microsoft is probably the most conservative with release dates. They rarely delay a product (at least publicly), because they do not announce or show them to the press until they're at a certain point in their development. Assuming the game ships as intended this Fall, *Age of Kings* has suffered a delay of a full year.

Microsoft showed the game to an eager press corps in February of 1998. That game, which was previewed in our May issue, looked a bit different than the one you're seeing on these pages. It may not be immediately apparent, but the buildings are a bit smaller than originally envisioned.

As with most games, the proportions of the individual units to the buildings is absurd. You either have 200 foot tall soldiers, or really tiny buildings. In the early versions of *Age of Kings*, the size of the units remained the same as they were in the first game, but the buildings were proportionally closer in size. However, many in the press grumbled that you'd lose track of units and, more importantly, due to the



Now those are big horses



The different civilizations have distinctive looks

extreme zoom in, you'd lose perspective on the big picture.

While the larger buildings looked terrific, once implemented, the team at Ensemble found it negatively impacted the playability of the game. "Many of the people who liked the bigger buildings were also playing on gigantic monitors at 1280x1024 resolution," says Shelley. At those resolutions, you could see so much more of the map that the larger building size didn't cause you to lose as much perspective on the bigger battle.

To combat situations like this, Ensemble forced everyone to play the game at the default resolution, which is 800x600. The upshot of that experience was that they generated a new formula for building size, where wonders would have a five-tile print, castles four, and other special buildings three. (By comparison, barracks are a single tile.) "You only see this kind of thing in testing," says Shelley. "Game design is 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration, and as gamers, we rely on our instincts."

And to check if their instincts are correct, they rely on Microsoft's usability labs.

Improved pathfinding will (hopefully) keep cavalry in formation while navigating areas like this

Age of Usability

Microsoft has a detailed usability lab on their Redmond campus, and all of their games pass through it at multiple points in their development. "It's really eye-opening," says Shelley, "sitting and watching someone play for the first time and seeing as they fumble with things we thought were obvious."

The building size issue was one of the first things tested. "We went through and did the Western-era building set," says Terrano, "and played with it a lot." Even at that point, they had already decided to reduce the size of the buildings somewhat, so they made them smaller and then sent them over to Microsoft. There it was tested with over 40 people, which generated a lot of feedback from people who had never seen the game. "We also took each building and ran them through a recognizability test," says Terrano. "We asked them 'What does this look like.'" If the building failed, it was re-done.

Even with the reduced size, units still move behind buildings. "We experimented with different things—a sort of dithered effect around the unit, or making the buildings go transparent," says Terrano. They didn't care for those approaches. "A lot of those things really took away from the solidity and feel of the environment."

Instead, units that pass behind buildings are outlined, and are still selectable by the player. When playing the game, you're able at-a-glance to tell what the unit is (based on its outline) and what it is doing (the unit still animates). This feature was also run through the usability labs, and Terrano says that both hardcore and casual gamers preferred the outlines.

Age of Artwork

A good design aesthetic is critical to delivering what they feel is most important to a game's success—give the player a terrific first 15 minutes of play. This simple concept may sound ridiculous to gamers who are used to wading through manuals or learning arcane interfaces, but in the expanded game market it's critical to keeping more casual players. People have short attention spans.

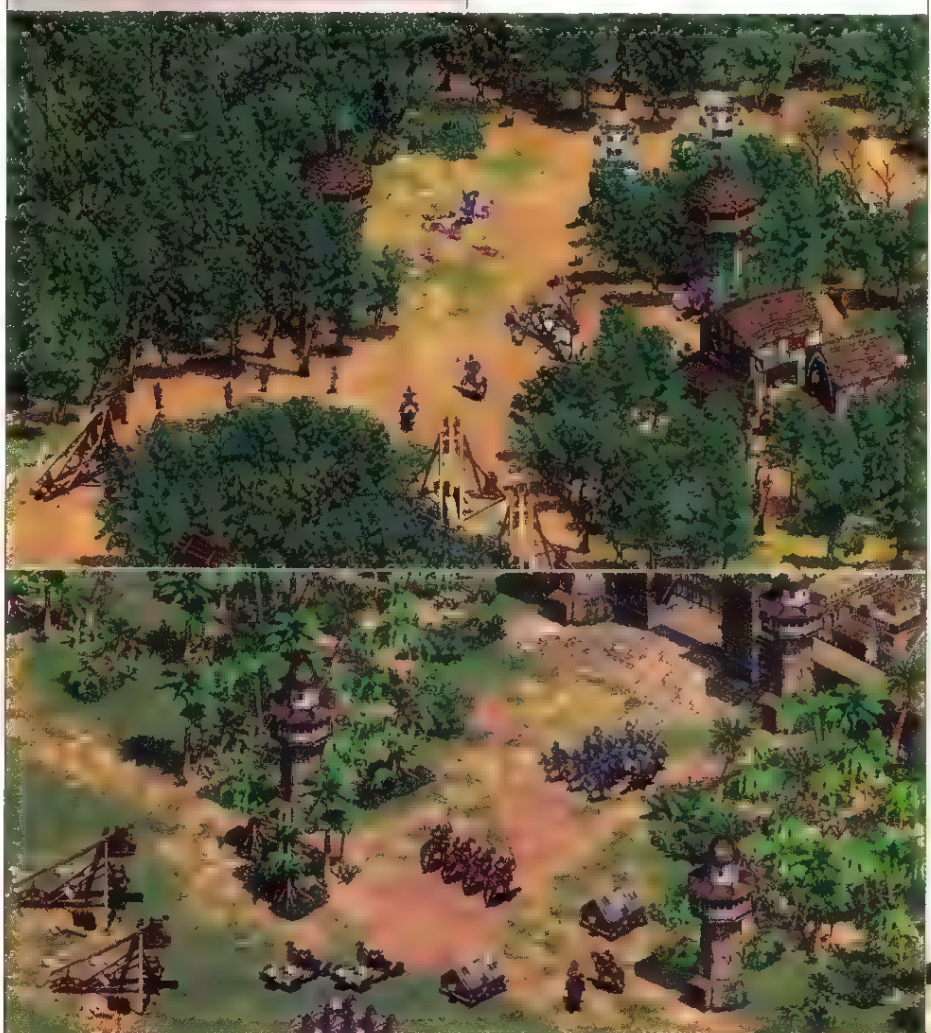
While it may seem like heresy to spend so much time discussing art, Ensemble feels it's the second most important part of a game's success. "Good art never hurts a game," says Shelley, who's sort of come around on the role art plays in a game. "Working with Sid [Meier, with whom he designed *Railroad Tycoon* and *Civilization*], art was considerably lower on the list."

Age of Closing

Much of Shelley's design philosophy was developed with Sid Meier, and it mostly boils down to a simple concept: give the player interesting decisions. You see this in *Civilization* (and *Alpha Centauri*) with the technology trees, and they've infused the *Age of Empires* series with this same philosophy. It obviously struck a chord with gamers, both hardcore and casual, and both Microsoft and Ensemble feel that *Age of Kings* will have the same sort of appeal.

Hardcore gamers often bristle at a game that's trying to satisfy more casual gamers, but Shelley is more realistic. "As long as we're doing a real-time strategy game, we're trying to reach both of those groups." He feels that *Age of Kings* will deliver enough new features to satisfy the needs of both groups, however disparate they may be. "The hardcore gamer has more interesting things to do, and we've given them several new options to make them better and more efficient. Both groups are going to get value from the game, and they can play completely differently and not understand how the other is playing, but it's all there in one big box."

And on that note, let the RTS Wars begin anew. ■



[above] Note the outline of the trebuchets in the forests;
[below] The blue cavalry units are about to proudly march to their death

AGE OF EMPIRES II

GENRE Real-Time Strategy

PUBLISHER Microsoft

RELEASE DATE Fall 1999

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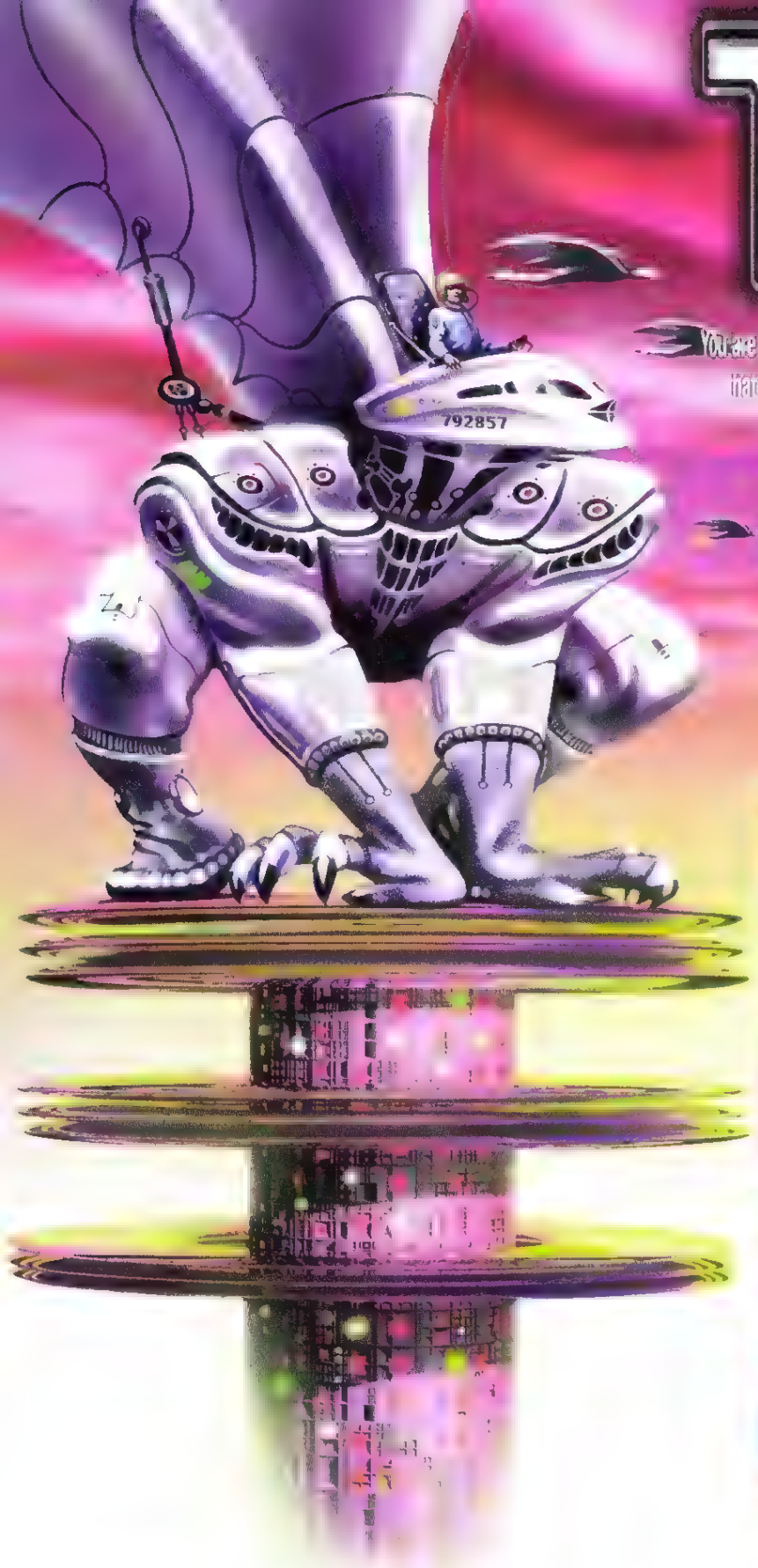

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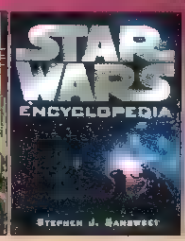

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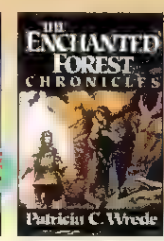

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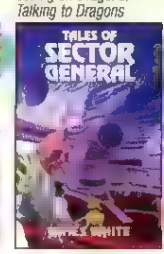

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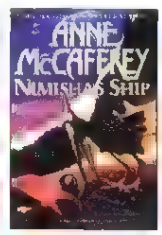

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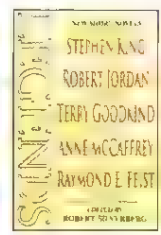

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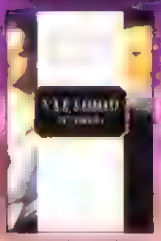

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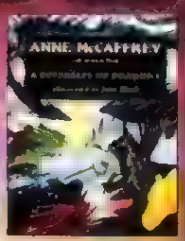

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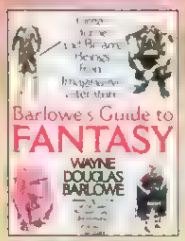

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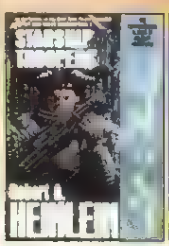

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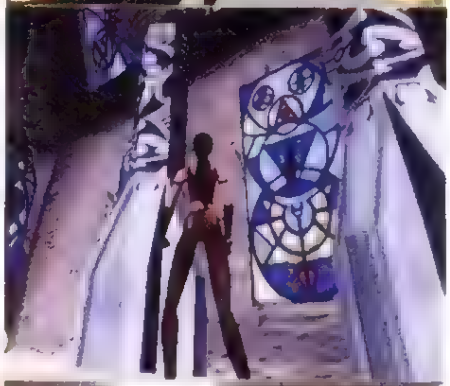
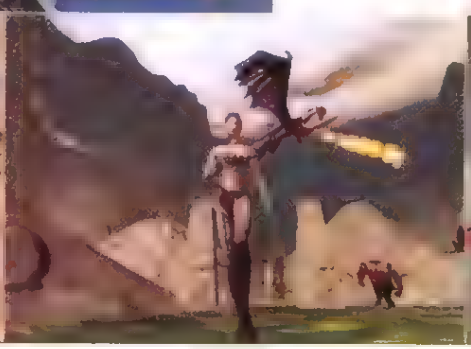
Flying the *Unfriendly* Skies

Psygnosis takes

Few games look quite as beautiful as this one. The game moves seamlessly from indoor to outdoor locations, whether you're Rynn or Arokh





a big summer gamble with Drakan: Order of the Flame

The evolution of a beast: from sketch to high polygon count model to the in-game version, you can see that Surreal has done an excellent job capturing the feel of their original piece of concept art

Your sword has drunk deep, and, as always, it's thirsty for more. But a glance around the canyon reveals more Wartoks—the hulking, brutish orcs of the realm—than you might choose to confront right now. A surreptitious sneak through their midst is an option, albeit a risky one. Luckily, you've got a better choice. His name is Arokh. He is your dragon.

"Arokh! To me!"

No sooner are the words uttered than the flapping of tremendous wings fills the sky. Your ancient reptilian steed descends, and you (the avenging female warrior Rynn) mount his back. In the next instant you're soaring high above the scenery, occasionally dipping down to give the Wartoks a taste of your fire, delivered the really old-fashioned way-from your dragon's incendiary mouth.

This is *Drakan: Order of the Flame*, Psygnosis' upcoming genre-buster of a game. You'll be hearing plenty about it before its projected June 1999 release, as the company is planning on unleashing a $1.2 million marketing campaign. *Drakan* is a third-person action/fantasy/adventure hybrid that Psygnosis's hopes will score as high with the mainstream populace as with hardcore gamers, thanks to its spectacular gimmick. Who hasn't dreamed, at some point in their lives, about mounting a dragon and taking wing?

On land and in the air

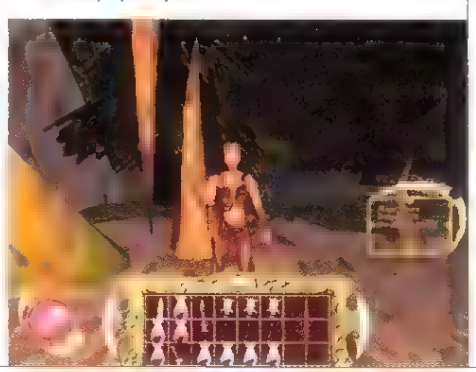
Unfettered 3D flight on the back of a dragon is *Drakan*'s most obvious selling point, but there are others. Jaded action gamers should appreciate the unprecedented combination of flying and land-based encounters. Duel Wartoks and giants on the ground, spiders in caves, and other dragons in the air. Through it all, feel the emotional connection provided by a fine movie or a good novel. Part fantasy adventure, part third-person hack-and-slash, part aerial combat, *Drakan* truly makes its own rules.

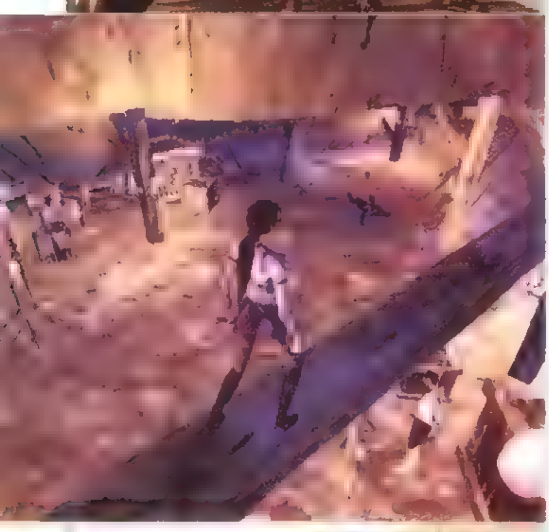
"We first tackled and perfected the dragon flight model," says Alan Patmore, CEO of Surreal Software, which designed the game (and its Surreal engine) for Psygnosis. "Rynn was the second challenge. We wanted to use the same controls as the dragon so the transition from ground to air was as seamless as possible."

Flying and dealing death from Arokh's back is an undeniable blast. The world is spectacularly open; there's nary a corridor to be seen. Instead there are lush outdoor 3D environments complete with snowfall, waterfalls, and flocks of birds, and plenty of room to stretch your membranous wings. Flying around is such a stomach-churning kick, in fact, that if the choice were left up to players they might never disembark, thereby hamstringing one of the game's unique attributes. This is *not* meant to be just a flying game.

"We needed a logical way to get the player off the dragon," Patmore elaborates. "We accomplished this by creating what we call 'plugs,' natural 3D obstacles that prevent the dragon from entering certain areas. Plugs usually come in the

A pop-up interface allows you to check out Rynn's inventory of weapons and items





You have full control of the camera, and you'll want to look around these spectacular environments

form of doors, cracks in walls, or gates that the dragon cannot physically penetrate. Rynn is obviously much smaller, and can enter these areas."

It goes both way; some areas can only be accessed on dragonback. There are also parts of the story that depend on Rynn and Arokh becoming separated, Rynn will need to cross terrain on foot that she flew over the first time.

Even when they become separated, *Drakan* keeps track of both characters. "The dragon will defend himself when separated from Rynn," Patmore says. "He will bite any creature that comes within a certain distance of him. But Arokh does not act independently of Rynn to solve quests. He won't fly around killing things and solving puzzles. Most of the puzzle-based environmental action occurs on foot, when Rynn is separated from the dragon."

An epic tale (and some not-so-epic side quests)

Drakan starts with a cutscene detailing a Wartok invasion of Rynn's village. Rynn loses consciousness; when she wakes up she discovers that her friends and relatives have all been killed, with the exception of her brother Delon, who has vanished. The revered village elder (called Atmar) sets Rynn on a path towards the dragon Arokh, a necessary ally for the task of finding and rescuing her lost brother.

As with any good fantasy adventure, however, more is at stake than the problems of a single family. Indeed, two combatants from the misty past, believed to have vanished forever, are preparing to return to the realm and spark up a primeval conflict. On one side is the Order of the Flame, the elite honorable warriors soul-bound to dragons (and the friends of ancient Arokh). After the end of the age of chaos, humans and dragons, who had previously been enemies, made peace with each other and established a new world order including representatives of both races. On the other side is the evil traitor Narvos and his dragon steed Werokh, who once betrayed the Order and nearly conquered all. In the wake of his betrayal, the Order was scattered and now exists—how else?—"only as the superstitious muttering of the aged." Narvos has long been believed dead, but his nefarious influence can once again be seen spreading throughout the land.

You've got your work cut out for you. *Drakan* offers four distinct regions—a village, canyons, mines, and a grotto—which blend into each other to create the feeling of one large world. These four regions are populated by eighteen kinds of monsters, with five bosses. Baddies include the Wartocks, spiders, giants, scavengers (carrion-eating undead who move on all fours), and, of course, dragons (most notably Blade Dragons, which travel in packs, and Werokh, the dreaded Ice Dragon).

Side quests will help form a narrative structure as the game progresses. Patmore offers an example. "A farmer will tell Rynn that he will give her a map to a magic sword if she kills all the spiders in his cave. Rynn must then enter the cave and figure out how to kill all the spiders. To do this she may need to solve a couple of puzzles and engage in a lot of combat. A typical subquest like this would take the average player around 15 to 30 minutes, and there may be ten of them per level." Each region will feature about ten "levels," although each will blend into the next to support the unified feeling.

Action versus emotion

In its quest to combine genres, *Drakan* risks alienating gamers who like to know what they're buying before they plop down their money. As with Hollywood movies, marketing is easier when you can sell a product to a specific demographic. On the other hand, the true innovations of the genre occur only when a game dares to stake out new ground. There's no doubt that *Drakan* provides plenty of action; but how much character development (read: emotional connection) does the game really supply?

"*Drakan* has from the start been designed to be a character-based game," says Patmore. "The story and character development are vital parts of gameplay. Each character has been carefully designed to evolve through the course of the game. Both Rynn and Arokh manifest this evolution in actual increases of power."

The characters are, at the very least, in the general ballpark of well-developed. Rynn is hotheaded, impetuous, and skeptical. She is skilled but very young, and as her story progresses she learns more about the ways of the realm, not to mention the use of various weapons, a smattering of magic, and the responsibilities inherent with being a dragon-rider. Arokh the dragon is hoary and wry, as he sometimes reveals when you summon him from close by—he accuses you of being lazy. Even the Wartoks enjoy a decently-realized sense of personality. They cluster in tribal fashion, usually around a leader. They like to drink and fight amongst themselves. And they have a penchant, as an early cutscene in a cave memorably illustrates, for torture.

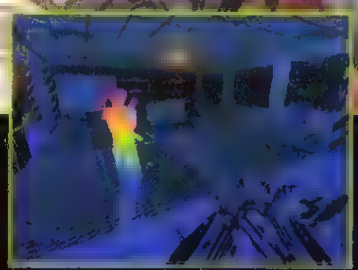
Smart bad guys, and the weapons that tame them

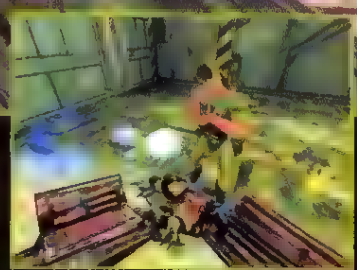
The eighteen distinct monster types in *Drakan* exhibit eighteen unique types of behavior, which has been accomplished by creating eighteen discrete kinds of AI. The theory is that Wartoks will think like Wartoks; Giants like Giants, etc. Even within species, however, there's room for personalization.

"Our tools allow each [creature] to be tweaked individually," Patmore explains. "For example, I can make one troll flee when he notices the dragon. Another may run to a ballista when he sees the dragon, while yet another will run and alert other Wartoks. The coolest AI so far has to be the primitive giant. He picks up anything and everything around him and throws it at the player. This includes any creature or body part that gets within the giant's reach."

The bigger they are, the harder they fall. If, that is, you've got the tools necessary to send them toppling. Luckily, both Rynn and Arokh possess an impressive array of melee tactics. Rynn,

THE DEADLIEST CREATURES
IN THE UNIVERSE ARE ABOUT TO
MEET THEIR MATCH...





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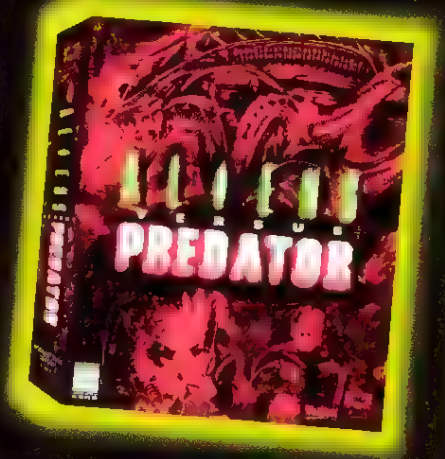

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Rynn will be doing battle with a wide variety of denizens in the game. She can carry weapons in either hand, and they wear out over the course of the game, requiring you to find new ones

the female warrior, makes use of speed, agility and expertise instead of brute strength. Her defensive moves are plentiful, including back flips, cartwheels, and rolls. Her offensive moves—using over fifty weapons like swords, spears, crossbows and maces—are no less impressive. The game allows for special combination attacks like jumping and turning while slashing. Rynn makes use of a few spells, mostly in a defensive capacity, as the game progresses, she also swims, climbs ladders, and slides. About 150 animations, synchronizing her upper and lower body movements, make her look as good as she fights—which is pretty good indeed. (Lara, watch out!)

Arokh also has some tricks up his scaly sleeve. He absorbs the abilities of his victims, which enables him to increase the variety and effectiveness of his missile attacks as the game proceeds. Fiery dragon breath is a fine starting place, but you'll also get the chance to play around with breath attacks like Ice, Gas, Lava, and Lightning.

A Surreal engine

Stuart Denman, Lead Programmer for Surreal Software, is proud of the engine his company has made for this game. When standing beside a group of bad guys, they look good; when flying away from them, they still look good, and while swooping towards them again with a fireburst building in your dragon's throat, they look best of all.

"Most people think of outdoor environments as those found in *Tomb Raider* or *Unreal*," Denman says. "But *Drakan* has a very different feel because you can fly up so high. This means the engine has to be able to render armies of enemies on the ground while you're flying. Taking flight on Arokh doesn't change the way the engine renders the scenes. The Surreal Engine just looks at the scene and notices that objects no longer need to be drawn with the same detail as before, so it scales down the number of polygons." Typical performance on a 300MHz Pentium II a Riva128 would be 30 frames-per-second, he says, rendering over 100,000 actual polygons per second.

Another feather in the Surreal Engine's cap is the in-game cinematic system, called STOMP. *Drakan's* ultimate goal is to create a seamless playing experience-between ground and air scenes, between action and adventure elements, between regular gameplay and cutscenes—and STOMP is its secret weapon.

"STOMP allows us to combine AI with prerecorded scenes," says Denman, "so we don't have to record a door opening, for example, we just let the door open itself. Cutscenes look very realistic because if the player walks Rynn into a scene carrying an axe, she will be holding the axe while talking. Birds will fly around in the background while a farmer gives Rynn a quest. STOMP is so flexible and subtle that the player will have trouble deciding what is programmed and what is pre-recorded!"

Rushing the net

In addition to the single player game, *Drakan* will offer three multiplayer options. Two are fairly straightforward variations on deathmatching, while the third tosses in a wild card-one dragon, and many riders hoping to tame it.

Dragon Match offers battles on dragonback. As in the single player game, rider and dragon health are linked, which means that any damage you soak is shared equally. Stalk your prey on the ground and in the clouds, trying to tally more kills than your opponents.

Battle Challenge is *Drakan* without the dragons-stalk and kill on foot only. The thrill of victory, after all, can be better at close range.

Queen of the Dragons puts a twist on deathmatching by providing a "Soul Stone" in a random location on the map. Players start on foot and search for the Stone, crossing each other's paths and battling with cold iron *en route*. The lucky finder of the Stone can call an untamed dragon and wreak havoc from above. Should misfortune befall him, he will be reborn on foot, a minute later the dragon will also be reborn, with the Stone randomly replaced on the map.

A breakout hit?

Psygnosis is giving *Drakan* a top-of-the-line push, hoping to make the break into mainstream territory that means huge revenue. After looking at unfinished code for the game, it's easy to see why they're putting so much behind it. Forget the story, the graphics, the hybrid of airborne and land-based combat, the deathmatching, the integrated cutscenes—forget all of it. The real allure of *Drakan* is the dragon flying element, plain and simple. Kids (and the adults those kids become) have dreamed about riding dragons for centuries but they've never had a chance to give it a try. Even Hollywood has failed to provide a suitable vicarious substitute, movies like *Dragonslayer* and *Dragonheart* left something to be desired.

When Patmore tries to explain the game's appeal, he talks (quite convincingly) about dreams. "It's pretty common that, as children, most of us have dreams based on fantasy worlds often populated by strange, ominous creatures that would make us want to become heroes in the face of such evil. [illegible] the freedom of flying aspect that we all experience at some point in the dreaming experience. Essentially, we wanted to bring the combined elements of these visions into a game-based experience to create an epic 3D fantasy world, and to let the gamer experience the freedom of flight as well as ground combat. Only today is the PC powerful enough to achieve this."

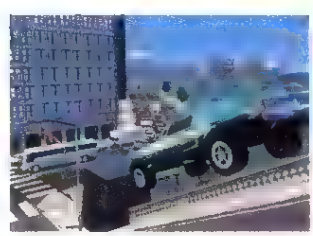
If Psygnosis has what they think they have, *Drakan* will surely soar to the top of the charts. More importantly, it will give every one of us the chance to saddle up a real red dragon and take him for a spin. In short, it will be like a dream.

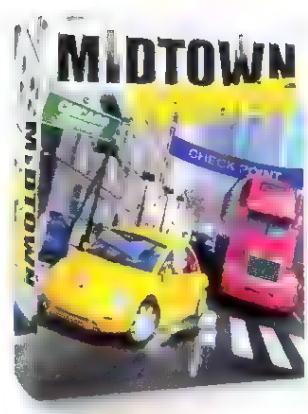
DRAKAN: ORDER OF THE FLAME

GENRE Action/Adventure

PUBLISHER Psygnosis

RELEASE DATE Summer 1999





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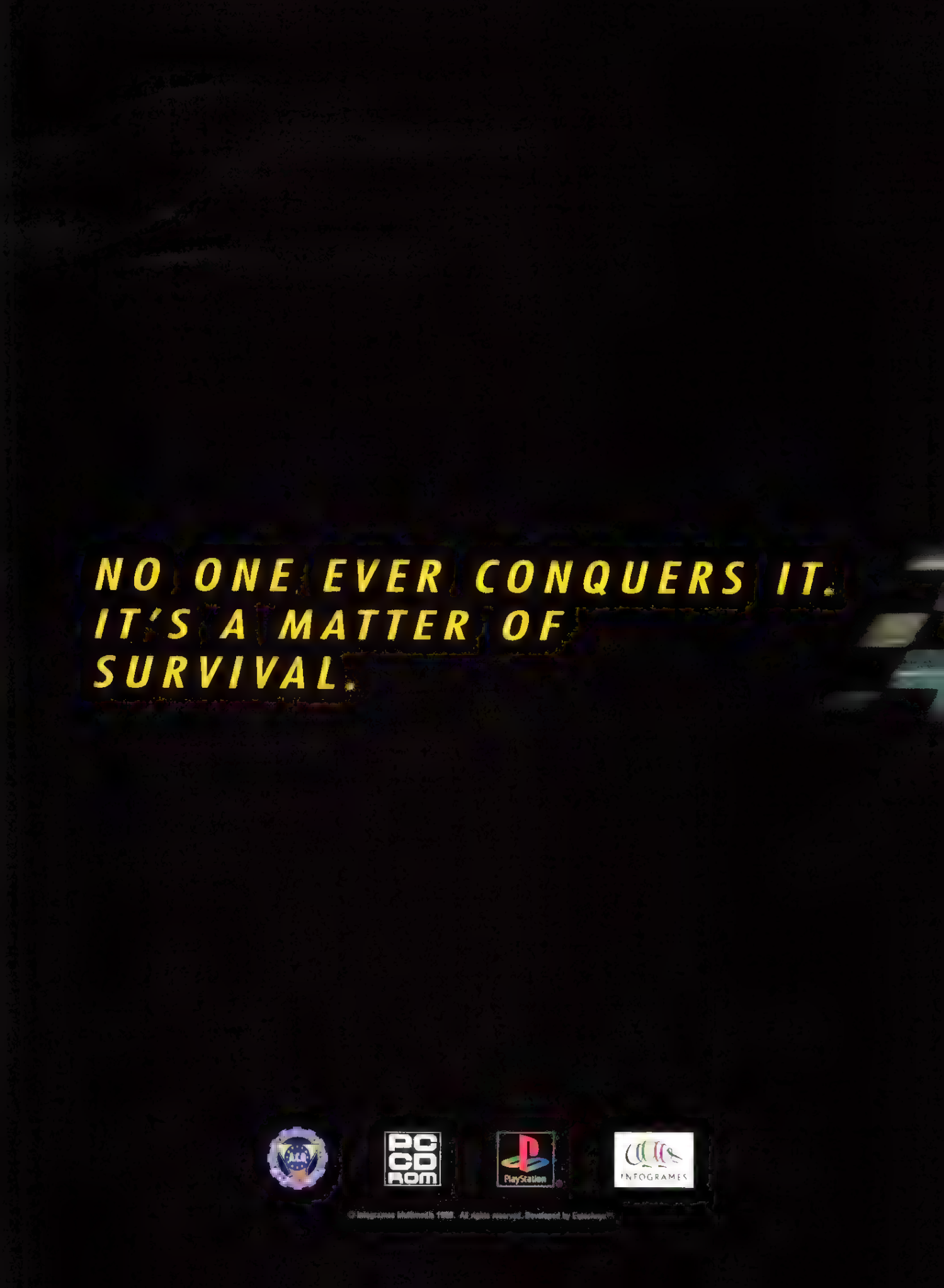
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· [below] "Stormy weather...." Environmental effects may hamper your activities in some missions

››› [middle] It can be a rush to follow a vehicle from close behind

· · [top right] Eahhh, Hoth has nothing on this planet...

· [bottom right] "Red Alert! Lens flares spotted in sector five!

Looking Down

Star Trek: New Worlds heads groundside

by Scott Udell

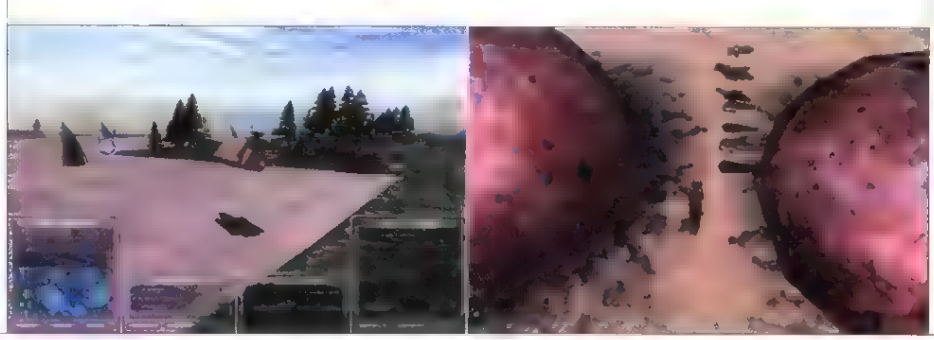
Every once in a while, a game design comes along and your initial impression is, "What are they thinking?" Such was the case when we first heard about Interplay's upcoming Star Trek: New Worlds, a real-time Star Trek strategy game in the general Command & Conquer mold. What's this? Set on the ground?! The only time the Star Trek goes to ground is when the crew beams down to investigate something; that makes it territory for an adventure game like (ahem) Vulcan Fury, not a strategy game... right?

Well, the folks at Interplay, their new strategy game division 14° East, and developer Binary Asylum certainly don't think so, and you know, after seeing what they've actually got underway, they may have something here. They key issues, of course, are how to differentiate themselves from all the other Command & Conquer-style (versus Myth-style) real-time strategy games in terms of game design and how to bring Star Trek down to, er, "planets" in a way that fans will accept. Two tough crowds, RTS gamers and Trekers; let's look at Interplay's plans for assuaging both.

Brave new worlds

New Worlds is set several months before events in the movie *Star Trek VI: The Undiscovered Country*. The Romulans are testing a new super weapon (can you blame them? The Federation built that Genesis Device which despite their claims, *must* be a weapon—just look at what the Klingons went through to try to get it). Of course, something goes very, very wrong. The test ship, working in the Neutral Zone, is destroyed, and a rupture, or rift in sub-space opens. Through this anomaly appear a variety of new planetary systems, all inhabitable (more or less) and all possessing a wealth of natural resources. Hmmm. Three powerful groups, separated by a no-man's land in space. Rich ewes of planets appear between them, apparently ripe for the picking. What do you think's going to happen? A planet rush, son, and it's every power for itself.

The game will be played out over some 40 single-player missions split among the three empires (sugar coat the Federation all you want, it's still a collective empire). Producer Chip Bumgardner likens the story progression to that found in *StarCraft*—while you can play any one side you want to, you have to play all the sides to get the whole tale. Some of the missions will be points where perspectives meet—you'll get to play the mission from one side then, later on, get to play it again from another side (something Bumgardner says is bringing up interesting play balance issues). Interplay design notes also hint that a few missions will have us returning to bases we created



· [left] The game with all the interface panels open. When you are working with a panel it "solidifies," and you have the option to make it opaque all the time if you wish; ››› [right] The camera can be rotated to an overhead view as well

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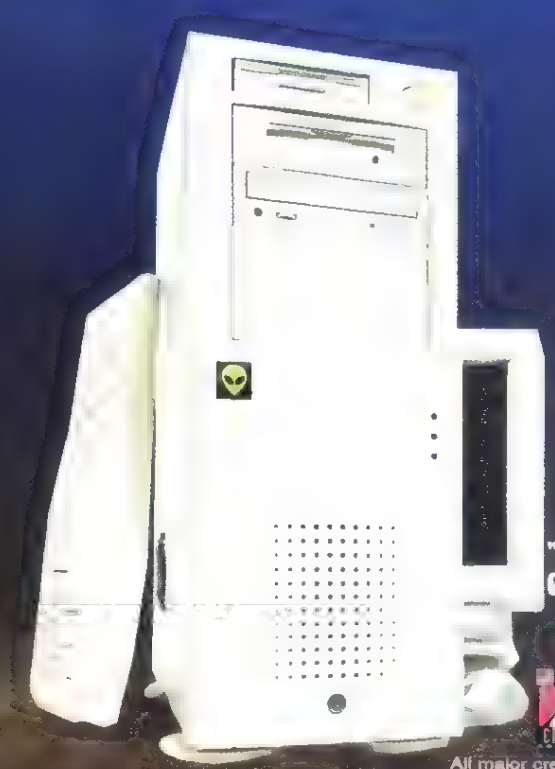

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in earlier missions—a kind of carry-over generally rare in RTS games. In addition to the three playable races, expect to encounter other aliens, both familiar (Bumgardner mentions Orion pirates) and new (you didn't think those worlds would be uninhabited, did you?). Being *Trek*, the tale you'll uncover will include a six million year-old war come again, superior alien beings you have to outwit or befriend, and unexpected alliances.

Mission goals, your appropriate actions and responses, and your strengths and weaknesses will all depend on the side you chose. As the Federation, you're of course not in it for the planets, no sir! Rather, you're exploring, and hoping to protect any native populations from the ravages of the Klingons and the Romulans. As such, your goals are usually peaceful—scientific, exploratory, or diplomatic—although you're prepared to fight if you have to. Your strengths are in your scientific and technological capabilities, and you'd better follow Federation procedures. The Klingons are of course warriors, and their buildings and vehicles exhibit those characteristics. Klingons are, however, bound by their code of honor, don't expect, for example, a hearty "*Qapla'!*" from the Klingon High Council if you destroy an unarmed transport full of civilians. The Romulans have no particular scruples; if they can get away with it, no problem, and they'll use their skills at espionage and their exclusive ground-based cloaking technology to help them get away with anything they can.

Making New Worlds Trek

At a recent briefing on their *Star Trek* lineup, Interplay got George Takei (*Star Trek*'s Sulu) to call *New Worlds* "...the first ground-based *Star Trek* strategy game ever developed." (Takei was speaking from a script prepared by Interplay's Brian Christian, head of 14 East). As discussed, that's the first rub—what can they do to give a game not based around starships or familiar characters that *Trek* feel?

The first obvious step involves audio and visual touches. Each race will encompass the now-standard look for the race developed for, in particular the movies (note that, since the Romulans don't have a movie look, the team has had to stretch their imaginations a bit to come up with an appropriately Romulan feel that *doesn't* draw from that of the *Next Generation* era—Interplay doesn't have that license). Familiar *Trek* chirps, twitters, whoops, and whines will be scattered throughout the game at the right point, so when you open up an interface panel, it'll look and feel like a panel you might see being operated on one of the movies.

The next step is to incorporate plenty of familiar *Trek*nology: phasers, disruptors, transporters, shields, and more (there will of course be new *Trek*nology created just for the game). Such items will look and operate like their TV and movie counterparts; for example, Romulan cloaked tanks will shimmer out of existence when the cloak is engaged, but won't be able to fire without decloaking (don't worry—the owner of the tanks will see them as ghosted figures).

Making New Worlds new

At the same briefing at which Takei spoke, Interplay CEO Brian Fargo said that *New Worlds* "is a product which could stand on its own even without the *Star Trek* franchise behind it," and that is the second rub—how do you make the game stand out from the rest of the RTS crowd in gameplay terms?

It's quite obvious that Interplay thinks going 3D is one way. Fargo also said that the game is going to be "one of the first true 3D real-time strategy games." By the time the game ships, however, this contention may be watered down, as the majority of RTS games planned for the year will feature 3D. What this means is that *New Worlds* will have to implement 3D that stands out from all the rest. In the game, your viewpoint comes from a 3D camera that can either be tied to units or buildings or can be flown—within some limits which are still being tweaked—over the landscape. The camera's viewpoint can be zoomed in and out, spun around, and lowered to a near ground-level view or raised up to a traditional direct overhead view (or anything in between). With such flexibility, the control scheme will be key, but when we saw the game the controls were still in flux.

The core of the game is familiar: build bases, build units, conduct research to enable you to do more of the first two things. The game uses 3D to represent base building, instead of structures popping into place or "filling up," they're built polygonal panel by panel. One difference is that buildings tend to come with their own type of workers, workers which will scurry about the base helping with construction, moving items from building to building, and so forth, all mostly automatically. So, while you won't have to concern yourself (much) with constructing support units, they'll still play an important role, and their destruction may bring your base to a crawl if not a halt; also, a big base will look very busy, a lot like the space-based construct on yards seen in the movies (even a ground-based version of the Workbee puts in an appearance).

All the things you'll on the main game map will be hovering-ground vehicles (there won't be any player-controllable flying vehicles); while you'll see people moving about the base, none of the "units" you'll build will be people. But the importance of the idea of a crew in the *Trek* universe makes itself felt here. You *will* get personnel assigned to you, and it's your job to use them wisely. Do your mission objectives call for you to examine a new alien structure? Sounds like a job for a research vehicle, but you'd better be sure to transfer one of your science officers to it if you want any useful data. While you'll leave behind your bases and your vehicles when you move to a new colony (mission), you'll carry your crew with you, and since they increase their skills as they survive missions, proper management and protection of your top officers will come to be a big part of gameplay.

Bumgardner says that your technology discoveries move with you, too, so in a new mission you won't have to re-research technologies you had in the last one, you will, however, usually have to build structures again, but this fits with the story of the game which has you establishing new colonies as you go from planet to planet. And speaking of planets, expect a mixture of terrain types: temperate, arid, snowy, volcanic, etc.

So, a ground-based real-time *Star Trek* strategy game... whether it will crash into the ground of its design or land like a load of Klingons ready for battle is still, er, "up in the air," but the mixture of two very popular genres has enough potential that we'll keep our sensors on it.

››› "This is the United Federation of Planets; we come in pea...."

STAR TREK: NEW WORLDS

GENRE Real-time Strategy

PUBLISHER Interplay

RELEASE DATE Fall 1999

Man of War II

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-William Trotter
PC Gamer
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"Man of War II is a must buy for fans of classic naval warfare."

William [illegible]
[illegible]

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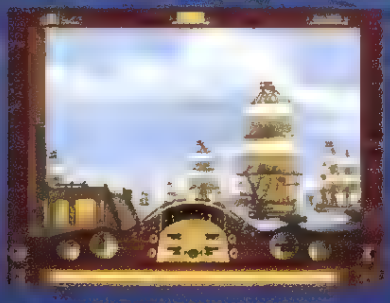

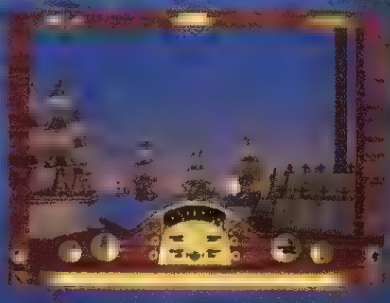

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›››The Grigari are a new race being introduced for the game; Play everybody's favorite Klingon, Worf; ›››Prylar Obanak—holy man or leader of the Pah Wraith fanatics?; ›››Cardy scum!

Trekking to the forgotten show

[clockwise from top left] ›››Visit depths of the station never before seen; ›››The Federation and Bajorans haven't reclaimed all the station... and you just know bad things lurk out of the light; ›››Looks like Sisko isn't going to have time to stop by Quarks as he dashes across the Promenade; ›››You'll have some control over the camera angle, although in almost all circumstances you'll be looking over your character's shoulder

by Scott Udell

Star Trek: Deep Space Nine is almost the orphan child of Star Trek television. Some love it, many scorn it, but it's plugged along, generating seven seasons worth of content... content that has, by and large, been ignored in the world of computer gaming. Yes, there was the little-liked adventure Harbinger, but since that game no one's touched the property... no one until Simon & Schuster Interactive signed a three-game development deal on games based around the sinister-looking station. Yes, this is the same Simon & Schuster that's produced the various interactive guides and quasi-games like Borg, but this time around they're planning a real game, a third person action game called Star Trek: Deep Space Nine—The Fallen.

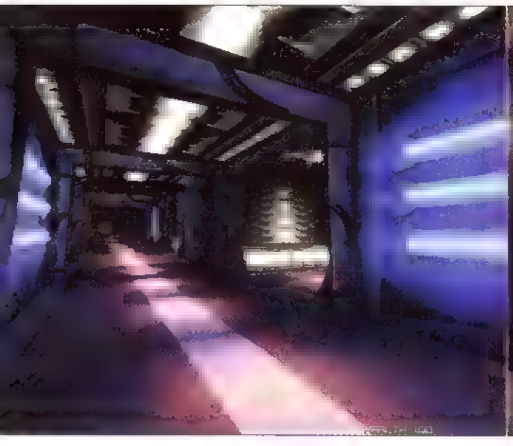
Tell me a tale

"*DS9*'s been kind of the lost child in games since *Harbinger* kind of failed," says Simon & Schuster's Ken Gordon, producer on the upcoming title. Why, then, do a game based on it? In part it may have something to do with being the only license left open, but creating a story also plays a big role, at least in the part of the game they're aiming at Trekkers. Currently set at the end of the sixth season, the *Millenium* storyline posits a move by the Bajoran Pah Wraiths to get back into the Celestial Temple. Three red orbs, brought into the right alignment, will open a mirror red wormhole, the home of the Pah Wraiths. If this is done near the current blue worm hole, the two will join and trigger the final battle for the Celestial Temple—the Armageddon of Bajoran religion, or a major clash between worm-hole aliens, take your pick. Some Bajorans have begun to believe that the Pah Wraiths are the true Prophets, and are working in secret to support them.

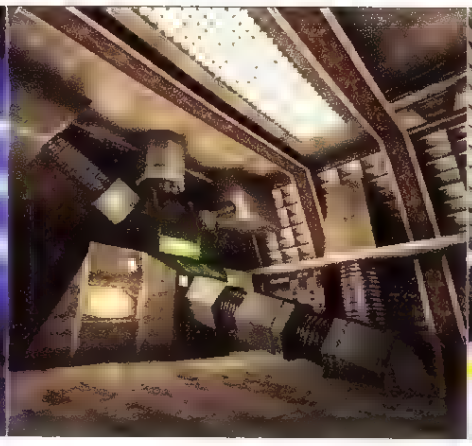
Sounds kind of like the seventh season's opener, eh? Officially, it's coincidence, but Gordon points out their plot line has been set for some time. Within this whole *Millenium* story, *The Fallen* only portrays the quest for the three Red Orbs, the rest of the story will come out in a series of novels being penned by the wife/husband team Judith and Garfield Reeves-Stevens (well-known *Trek* authors) and in a second game which will come out next year.

Give me a game

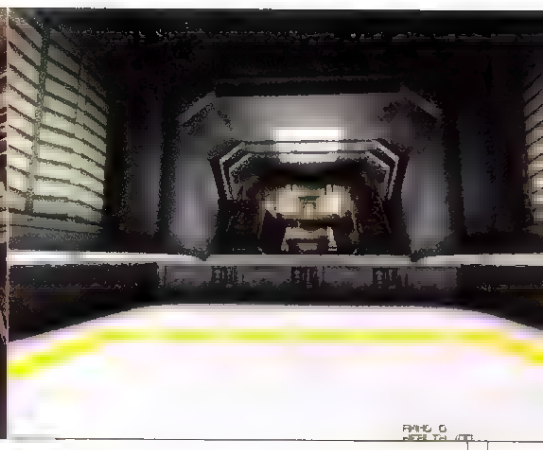
In addition to the necessity of *Trek* story, there's the issue of gameplay, and here Richard Hare, Creative Director and VP of The Collective, the group developing the game, takes over. "Historically there's been somewhat of a problem with *Star Trek* games where the license comes



›››While they're not modeling absolutely the entire station, you'll get to stretch your legs through plenty of it



›››Ore processing; enough to give a former Bajoran slave worker shivers



›››A runabout pad; better get off before it opens to space!

Star Trek: Deep Space Nine—The Fallen visits an area long abandoned by gaming

first and foremost and game design comes afterwards. Our thought process was, let's come up with a game we think would be great fun to play, and then you can neatly weave that into the actual franchise itself.

That game is *The Fallen*. While using the Unreal engine, the game itself is third-person, not first-person, but this won't reduce the action, just change it. "We wanted a pretty action intensive game," says Hare, but continues, "Obviously it would not be appropriate to the license to have purely combat only, so it's not a frag-fest in that regard, but the emphasis is on action."

Going third-person let's them do things with the characters you can't do in first-person combat things, swing on monkey bars, slide down things. It also lets them work the camera, as it were, says The Collective's Gary Priest, VP of Technology & Development, "We want to make it feel more cinematic than most third-person games that have come before without allowing the player to lose control or feel frustrated with the camera." There will be a mouse look-like system that lets you change the camera's view up and down but which will keep the view pointed over the character's shoulder. They may at times move the viewpoint away from the character, but that's something that's being looked at now.

On the technology side, Priest says that using the Unreal code hasn't really been a problem, yet so far it's slotting in, and they expect that the next code installment (coming when *Unreal Tournament* is done) will fix the well-known multiplayer problems. Even with a solid base though, there are things they wanted to do in the game that *Unreal* just couldn't handle, so they've added some of their own software technology. They've expanded *Unreal*'s character animation system with a skeleta-based one. This lets them get a lot more movement in, for example, the limbs of characters, and gives them better collision detection, so now you'll be able to watch a character's head track or shoot a gun out of an enemy's hand. A new level of detail system will let them reduce a character's polygon count as it gets smaller. Priest figures they'll have 50-75% more characters on screen at any one time than *Unreal* alone is able to achieve.

Show me a world

In the game, you'll play one of three *Deep Space Nine* characters: Sisko, Worf, or Kira. Hare and Gordon both make pains to point out that these aren't just different skins used to play through the same exact missions, but are fully realized characters which will offer a different version of the story and gameplay when you play them through. The game is played out across 12 missions, although perhaps "chapters" is a better term, as Hare says these are really, really large gameplay areas, with multiple objectives per area. You'll move from mission area to mission area in a linear fashion (Hare says, "As much as it's an attractive idea sometimes to think of non-linearity, it really is kind of a bitch when it comes to story telling"), but activities within each mission area aren't necessarily linear. Many of the missions will be duplicative in the sense that each of the three characters will play a role in them, but the actual paths followed and actions done will be different for each character. At times all three might meet during a mission and a non-interactive sequence will ensue, but beyond that characters' actions (and your gameplay) will be different. Additionally, each character will have three of his or her own mini-missions he or she might go on.

While Deep Space Nine itself is a key area for gameplay, it won't be the only area, Hare says only about 25% of the game will take place on the station itself. Other areas will include a Bajoran temple, a Cardassian facility, a Jem'Hadar internment camp, and several missions on the Defiant. If you know your *Trek*, you'll know that Deep Space Nine is a huge facility, and has many more areas than those shown on the show. Yes, we'll visit all the familiar ones, and many more besides: ore processing, fusion core, the upper pylons, the computer core, etc. Some of these areas will be defunct, not used since the station was under Cardassian control, and will let the game move from well-lit, occupied zones to grungy, run-down, abandoned ones. They're not building every single portion of the station—how many bathrooms can you model? (Just ask anyone who's cleaned out a tenement block in *X-COM Apocalypse*), but there'll be enough to satisfy most Trekkers' curiosity.

In addition to places, The Collective has gotten to create a new race as well. Called the Grigari, the team didn't share many details except to say this race will be, in later missions, the source of some of the heavy weaponry you'll pick up, including a concussion rifle and something like a multiple rocket launcher. Of course, you'll have the standard Federation-issue weapons like the phaser and Mark II phaser rifle, the Cardassian equivalents, and some Jem'Hadar nastiness (including the stealth mines introduced this season).

Unlike many 3D shooters, in *The Fallen* there may be some missions with plenty of non-player characters (NPCs) about, indeed, in some cases your objective may be to protect certain NPCs from harm. Hare says, "We're trying to incorporate all of the major characters that are in the show, even some of the supporting staff as well, and there'll be unique voice-over material as well. (When asked about Morn, he laughs and responds, "We're fond of Morn, and he's definitely going to be incorporated.") In some cases you'll even be able to communicate "strategically" with other characters to get them to help you do something. For example, you may call up to Ops to get them to seal off a certain part of the station.

In a final *Trek* touch, and one that may be a nice diversion for non-Trekkers tired of normal between mission text or video briefings, when you're not on a mission you'll get to wander about the virtual station, visiting locales and talking with characters from the show. While never necessary for gameplay, in some cases this will give you information about the story or upcoming missions that may be helpful, and in others it'll be sightseeing for the *Trek* fun of it... and after all, that's why we're all visiting this station way out in deep space, right?

STAR TREK: DEEP SPACE NINE—THE FALLEN

GENRE Third-person Action

PUBLISHER Simon and Schuster

RELEASE DATE November 1999

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'RAILROAD TYCOON II: THE SECOND CENTURY EXPANSION PACK' 18 new scenarios 1939-1950. Deliver troops & supplies to the Allied front & rebuild the British rail system. Protect Russia from the Germans. 1950-2005. Build a modern Metra system for Munich. Manage the Chunnel without drowning in debt. Link LA & San Francisco with a high speed rail. 2005-2030. Worldwide flooding & melting ice caps wreak havoc for the modern railroad tycoon. Your task is to build rail systems for this strange new world.

GOD (Strategy)
Release: 5/99
PC CD
$28.99

'RAILROAD TYCOON II'
Release: NOW
PC CD
$39.99

AGE OF EMPIRES II' Proceed from the Dark Ages to the Feudal, Castle & Gunpowder Ages in 13 civilizations. Create formations & garrison units and choose directions. Board & capture ships, and choose unit behaviors with multiple aggression levels. Includes random maps, campaigns, & scenarios. Separate economic & military diplomacy.

Microsoft (Strategy)
Release: 9/99
PC CD
$[illegible]

'TOTAL ANNIHILATION: KINGDOMS' This fantasy real-time strategy game engages you in the struggle of good against evil and magic against technology. New story line. 3-D articulated units, missions, multiplayer maps & worlds. Four selectable sides to choose from, each with its own unique magical & technological abilities.

GT Interactive (Strategy)
Release: 7/99
PC CD
$46.99

'STAR TREK GENERATIONS: BIRTH OF THE FEDERATION' Manage resources, solar systems and trade routes. Construct, maintain and refit a Starship fleet -- and engage in turn-base 3-D space combat! Features multiple skill levels, galaxy sizes and other options for long-term replayability. Multiplayer support for up to five players via LAN, direct connect, modem and internet.

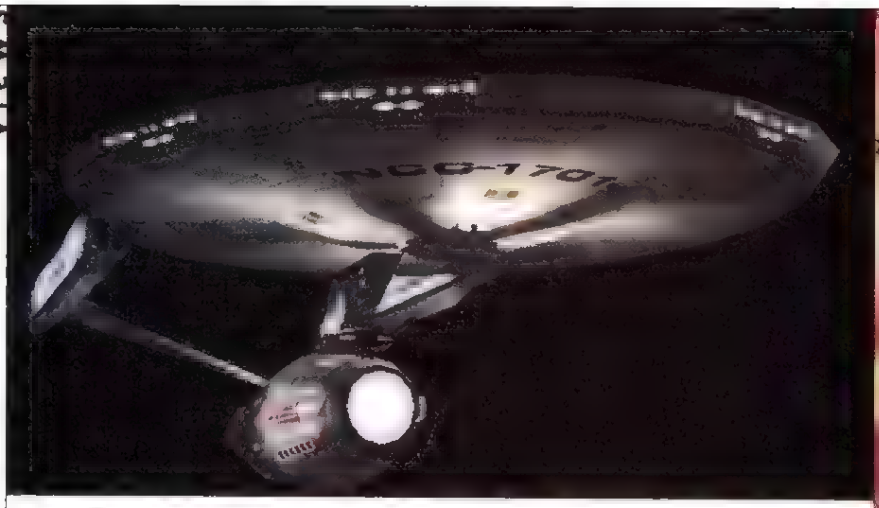
Microprose (Strategy)
Release: 6/99
PC CD
$[illegible]

'REVENANT' You play Locke D'Averam, a warrior brought back to life by a ruthless warlord. Your memories & abilities return as the game progresses. Using a mix of hand painted 2-D backgrounds & 3-D real time characters, Revenant takes you on a journey across the huge island of Ahkulon. Dynamic & static lighting & LAN & TCP/IP multiplay.

Eidos (Roleplaying)
Release: 6/99
PC CD
$29.99

'DIABLO II: INFERNO' Five new character classes with unique attributes & abilities. Four different fully populated towns, multiple dungeons, caverns & crypts. Expanded world filled with all-new quests, weapons, spells, armor & monsters. Advanced combat system which incorporates class-specific fighting techniques & spells.

Blizzard (Roleplaying)
Release: 9/99
PC CD
$[illegible]



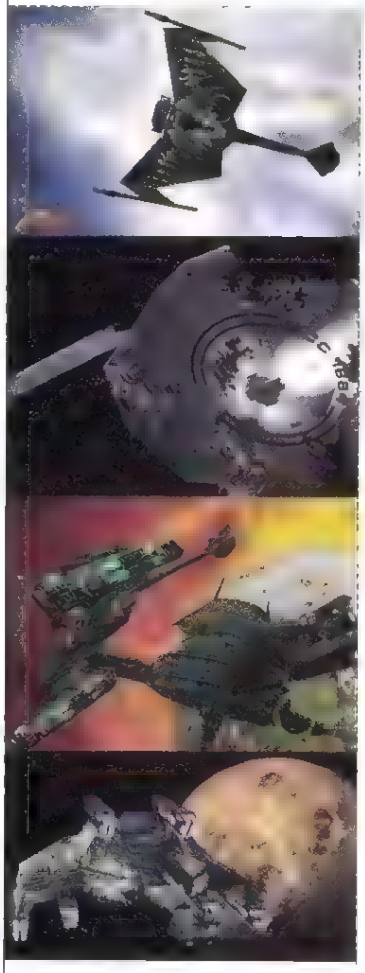
Even a Klingon cadet can admit some fear at the sight of this ship

Klingon Birds of Prey and D-7 cruisers at dock

Klingon Academy

When you're a Klingon, combat's the whole idea

by Scott Udell



[top to bottom] Civil war will have you fighting your own

Damage is progressive and just like in the movies

Klingon Academy features a new, slicker command system—issue all your orders without leaving the main screen

Now what's a ship of the Klingons' most fearsome class doing over Venus?

STAR TREK: KLINGON ACADEMY

GENRE Space Simulation

PUBLISHER Interplay

RELEASE DATE Fall 1999

You can tell Brian Fargo, Interplay Chairman and CEO, wants people to believe his company is behind their *Star Trek* products. "These are the *strongest Star Trek* games we've done in the history of the company," he proclaims to a group of journalists gathered to look at said games. *Starfleet Command* [featured last issue], *New Worlds* [see page 68], and, of course, *Klingon Academy*. "In space, all warriors are cold warriors," states the sonorous voice on Interplay's demo video; yes, *Star Trek* creator Gene Roddenbury may be rolling over in his grave at such sentiments, but it's something that's grown in the *Star Trek* mythos since his death—much to the delight of game developers—and if any group from the universe can best portray it, it's the Klingons.

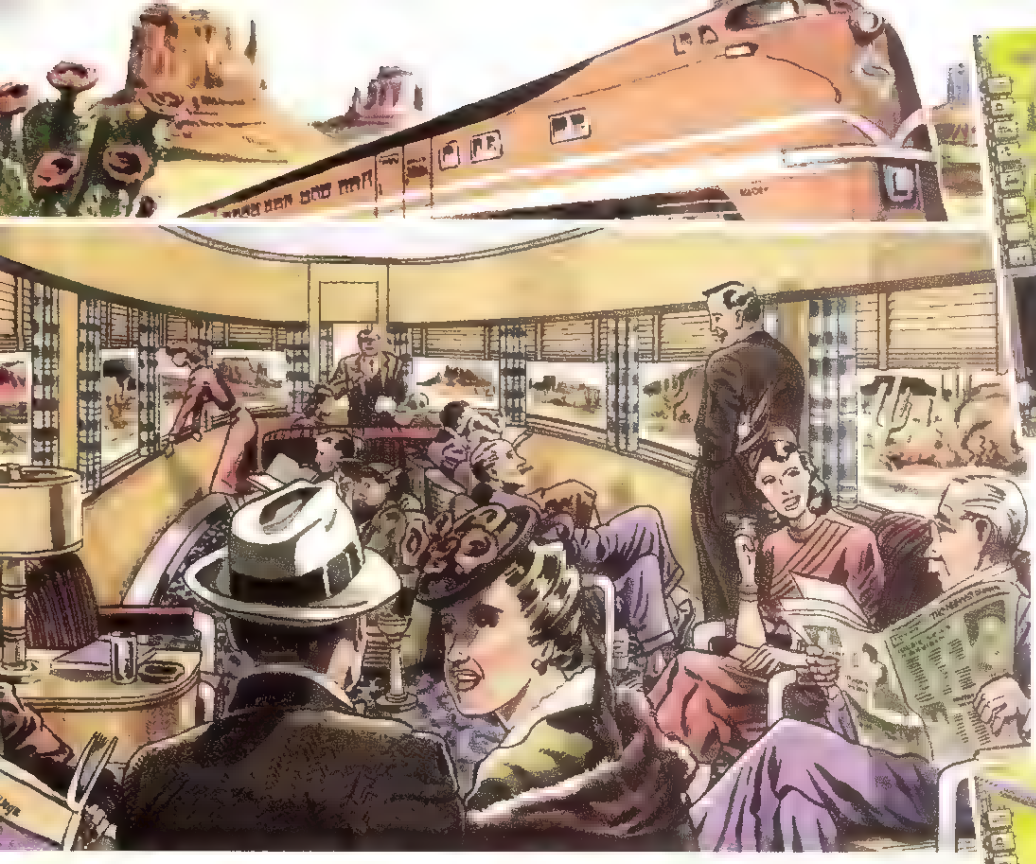
The idea behind the *Academy* games is that you're a cadet in training for service on starships. Your initial "missions" are simulations (within a simulation?), and are considered training; you get evaluated on your performance, but a loss is just embarrassing, not deadly. In *Klingon Academy* you'll also learn a lot along the way about Klingon values, especially honor, from the great Chang himself. The Academy portion comprises about half the game, and even includes its own storyline and end-of-game sequences. In the second half of the game, war breaks out, and what was simulation is now real combat, potentially deadly for your character and something that often puts him or her into conflict with the values learned in the Academy.

While the game will feature over 50 flyable ships (for custom missions or multiplayer), the core gameplay will revolve around the nine ship types of the Klingon navy, of which you'll fly seven. The game will have 25 missions, many of which will have sub goals or hidden extra elements. The first half of the game has you fighting a simulated war with the Federation (and perhaps some of the other four groups), and will culminate in a simulated battle with the Enterprise. There will also be some tutorial missions scattered throughout the game, although numbers haven't been determined yet.

Starfleet Academy got a mixed reception by reviewers and gamers alike. Many found the graphics engine weak, some found the control scheme (with multiple stations) confusing, and were thrown by what almost felt like fighter combat in big ships. Asked what they've done to address these concerns in *Klingon Academy*, producer Raphael Hernandez responded, saying "The 3D engine has been completely overhauled," and that now "whips maneuver through space like what you tend to see in movies and episodes, not like fighters." He also says that "the control interface has been completely redesigned."

Most of the changes he discusses were present in the pre-betas we looked at. In particular, the graphics have been pumped up and the interface simplified for those who want it (you may still switch to the detailed station screens if you wish, and in the single player game you have the option for slowing down external events when you do). "We're trying to make a game that will appeal to both [space sim and *Star Trek* fans]," says Brent Kollmansberger, one of the game's designers. "It's definitely a sim, but we tried to make it so you don't have to know all the intricacies of the stations to run it." All of the game's actions/orders can be accessed through quick keyboard menus or pre-set hotkeys; you'll only to a station's interface screen to get more information at a glance or to configure your controls and customized strings of orders (you'll often do this before a mission).

Yes, you do sit at the helm (joystick)—the gameplay isn't quite like being a captain shooting verbal orders to his crew—but things aren't quite as frenetic as the typical space shooter; rather, the pacing feels almost like close-quarters combat during the Age of Sail, where the big wooden ships unleashed vicious broadsides at close range. Space like? Perhaps not, but it does fit in with the space battle mythos as set forth by *Star Trek*. ■



All aboard in war torn Europe! In WWII, the great responsibility of securing supplies and transporting troops for the Allies is yours. The war years rely on the services of the iron steed. Be a patriot and do your part.

Athearn

CHECK OUT THE LIMITED EDITION RAILROAD TYCOON II TRAIN SET.
www.athearn.com/RT2

Today's urban dweller calls for efficient and effortless travel. The all new Metra scenario will challenge you to create a passenger light rail system for the citizens of Seattle.

In the future, the Geothermic power plant taps the Earth's core for energy. You must implement the rail system that supports this unusual industry.

EXPANSION PACK FOR THE 1998 STRATEGY GAME OF THE YEAR.

RAILROAD TYCOON II

The Second Century.

Every man, woman, and child who enjoyed the pleasantries of an afternoon well spent with the smash PC hit *Railroad Tycoon II* has anticipated the arrival of this ultra modern expansion pack. Eighteen all new campaign scenarios divided into three distinct historical eras are sure to delight today's modern PC gamer.

RIDE THE RAILS BACK IN TIME!

In the passage from 1939 through 1950, stop along the way to do your part for the war effort. Deliver troops and supplies to the besieged Allied front. Rebuild the British rail system after its destruction in the Blitz. Protect Mother Russia from the advancing Germans. Only a foolproof rail system can spell victory for the Allies!

MODERN TIMES REQUIRE PROGRESSIVE THINKING!

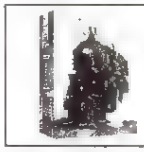
Next stop, the Modern Era. Solve the transportation problems facing the modern world from 1950 to 2005. Help build a modern Metra passenger system for Seattle. Manage the suboceanic Chunnel system between England and France without drowning in debt. Be the visionary who links two of America's greatest cities, Los Angeles and San Francisco, with long-awaited high-speed rail.

LAST STOP, THE FUTURE!

From 2005 to 2030, worldwide flooding and melting ice caps wreak new havoc for the modern railroad tycoon. The United States is a watery wasteland. The Mediterranean is an empty basin with a blossoming Eden. Antarctica is a promising agricultural center. The heady task of providing rail systems for this strange and exotic new world falls upon your shoulders. No doubt only the most ingenious solutions will do.

ONE OF THE WONDERS OF THE WORLD?

- THIS FINE GAME BOASTS NEW BUILDINGS! WEAPONS PLANTS... ARMY BARRACKS...AND A DISTILLERY.
- MELTED ANTARCTICA...FLOODED UNITED STATES...DRIED UP MEDITERRANEAN...THESE AND OTHER NEW LANDSCAPES ABOUND!



Follow-up to the 1998 strategy game of the year!

- NEW ENGINES! THE FRENCH TGV BULLET...THE GERMAN DB18 201 MODERN STEAM TRAIN...THE BRENNER412...ENJOY THEM ALL.
- PRESENTING NEW CARS SUCH AS METRA PASSENGER CARS... TROOP TRANSPORTS...AND WEAPONS FLATBEDS!
- OVER 15 EXCEPTIONAL STAND-ALONE SCENARIOS. MOST ARE MULTIPLAYER READY. BE THE FIRST ON YOUR BLOCK TO TRY THEM!

FULL VERSION OF RAILROAD TYCOON II REQUIRED TO OPERATE

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Tomorrow's EXPANSION PACK Today!

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The diminishing returns of advancing technology

by Jason Cross

Well, another Game Developer's Conference has come and gone. As usual, there was plenty of flashy technology there, despite being primarily a hiring ground and schmoozing zone for Game Developers rather than a venue to interest buyers and the press. A *Quake III Arena* demo was running at nearly everyone's booth, and from many reports, it looked pretty much the same on the great majority of new video cards. The Savage 4 was there, the TNT2 was there, the Voodoo 3 was there, Matrox's G400 was announced... and nothing really stood out. The feature sets are getting more and more similar all the time, and card manufacturers are trying to make themselves stand out with one or two little nit-picky features that their competition doesn't have. The "really important" features like 32bit color, stencil buffers, support for large texture, trilinear filtering, etc. are all supported by the great majority of cards. In this generation of video cards, things like price and driver quality are going to be increasingly important.

The games are reaching a similar state of "diminishing returns" on new technology, it seems. We've still a great deal of technical advancements to make, but even the "hot new tech" games like *Quake III Arena* and *Unreal* Tournament, while very good-looking, aren't the order of magnitude improvements over the previous generation of technology we've seen in the past. Some hardcore gamers have expressed disappointment that they're no longer "blown away" by looking at the games on the hottest new engines anymore, but this a bit hypocritical? So many of us have said for ages that we wish companies would focus more on the important aspects of gameplay like network code and interface and less time on eye-popping graphic effects. Now that it's starting to happen, the first thing out of our mouths is a complaint about how the games all look "pretty good" but nothing blows us away.

My prediction, by the way, is that we'll see more of a gap between the "killer" video cards and the rest of the pack again late this year. New engineering feats like geometry and lighting engines on future video cards will make for a dramatic difference between running a game on "card X" with a certain geometry setup implementation and "card Y" with a different implementation. We'll see how things shake out as the year progresses. For the time being, though, take heart in knowing that any new video card you buy in the next 6 months is bound to give you a very good gaming experience.

Q: I wanted to know if there is any way possible, (USB ports or whatever) to get a 3d card to work, any 3d card, on a laptop computer, or if there are plans for anything like it in the making

—Carlos P

A: Currently, and probably forever in the future, there is no way to get a 3D card made for a desktop computer to work in a laptop. They simply aren't big enough to stick a whole video card in (there's no room!), and thus they're not made with expandable video capabilities. Some sort of external 3D card via USB would be horribly slow, even much slower than a software rendering mode for games, because the USB port can't send or receive enough information fast enough for video. They're good for devices like modems and such, but video cards require much higher bandwidth than USB provides. What's more, laptop video chips have to be very energy efficient, and a full video card would use up more precious battery life.

A lot of current laptops ship with an AT graphics chip built in that is effectively a Rage Pro chipset with better video decoding abilities. S3 will soon start shipping a laptop chip called the SavageMX, which will be based on the Savage3D or Savage4 technology. So many laptops already have limited 3D acceleration (not quite good enough for modern high-end games), and much better laptop 3D is right around the corner. They'll only be available in new laptops though, so you'll probably never have good 3D on your current machine, but your next one might.

Q: I'm trying to put off buying a new PIII machine for awhile and wondered if the following might increase performance on my present machine: I have a Packard Bell P233 MMX with 96 MB RAM and a Monster 3D card. If I were to add a Voodoo 1 card (in SLI) or a Voodoo 2 would I likely get much benefit? I've read a Voodoo 2 in a Pentium machine isn't much help. Is that true? Also, can I put a Voodoo 1 and 2 in SLI?

—Robert O

A: Hey, you cheated, that's like three questions! Let's take them in turn... First, you would get no benefit from adding another Voodoo 1 card in SLI, because it can't be done. Voodoo 1 cards were not made to be put in an SLI configuration. If you happen to have a Voodoo 1 card with an SLI connector on it, I'd sure like to see it! Second, that line about a Voodoo^2 not being much of a benefit in a Pentium machine (as opposed to a Pentium II or K6-2) is a farce. The card will still have a higher fill-rate, and you should be able to run games at a resolution of 800x600 that you normally only ran at 640x480 before, without any real slowdown. The confusion comes from the fact that a Voodoo^2 will not be fully utilized in a Pentium-class system, but that's not the same thing. That only means that the limit to the speed of a modern 3D game is likely to be your processor, not the 3D card, so with the exception of running at higher resolutions, games really won't go a whole lot faster. Some will, but most won't. Third, you can not hook a Voodoo 1 and Voodoo^2 card in SLI. No Voodoo 1 cards were ever made for SLI and with the exception of Metabyte's Wicked3D, you need the same brand of Voodoo^2 card for an SLI configuration.

Q: What is the best 2D\3D combination card?
—Edward B

A: I get this question a lot—a lot. Unfortunately, there's no easy answer, as "best" is a pretty subjective term. Different things are important to different people. Some people want the fastest card, period. To them, the Voodoo 3 (which should be released by the time you read this) will be "best." Some people want 32bit color support and support for textures larger than 256x256, and the Voodoo 3 just won't cut it there. So they'll want a somewhat slower card that offers these features, like the ATI Rage 128 or Riva TNT based cards. Some people have a game or two they play religiously that only works with Glide and therefore they need a card made by 3Dfx. Some people need a card "right now" while others can afford to wait a month or two for the next greatest thing.

Of the cards released in general release at the time of this writing, our personal favorite picks are cards based on the Riva TNT chipset and the ATI Rage 128. But the Voodoo 3 cards, cards based on the Riva TNT 2, and cards based on the Savage 4 are all going to be released very soon.

The truth is, unlike in the last two years, the basic level of most 2D/3D cards is very good. None of the newer cards are obviously far outstrips the performance and features of the others, unlike the days when the Voodoo and Voodoo 2 were drastically superior to the rest of the pack. All new 2D/3D cards will give you a pretty darn good gaming experience. So hunt for the features that are important to you and the price you want to pay, and buy that card. ■

3dfx marketing blitz

3dfx recently announced a new marketing campaign geared toward the general market, rather than core gamers. This campaign marks more than just 3dfx's push into the broad consumer space, but also signals a new identity for the company, complete with new logo. Gamers accustomed to the old "3Dfx" logo will likely notice that the new one is much simpler, and the "d" is now lowercase. The idea was the make the logo simple, easy to reproduce in any printed or electronic form, and very easily identifiable.

The $20 million ad campaign will consist of numerous TV commercials developed by advertising agency Goody, Silverstein & Partners (the company known for it's "Got Milk?" and Budweiser commercials). The humorous commercials will air on MTV, ESPN, Fox, USA, Comedy Central, and even during the NCAA Finals. Accompanying the television campaign will be print advertising that stretches beyond the usual PC gaming and enthusiast magazines, with ads also appearing in the likes of Details, Maxim, Sports Illustrated, and Spin. Don't be surprised if you see the company's new tagline "so powerful, it's kind of ridiculous" on ad banners and interstitials all over the 'net, either.

3dfx's new retail presence will launch at the end of March with the Voodoo2 1000 PCI and Voodoo3 cards (2000, 3000, and 3500) appearing in unique boxes, often in separate 3dfx section. The new boxes are simpler, with less text, dominant colors, and unique photography. The goal is to be easily identifiable and less confusing to consumers who aren't hardcore gamers.

What new branding campaign would be complete without a website redesign? The new 3dfx website officially launches today at www.3dfx.com, with info on the new products and ad campaign, including the ability to download one of the new television commercials. ■

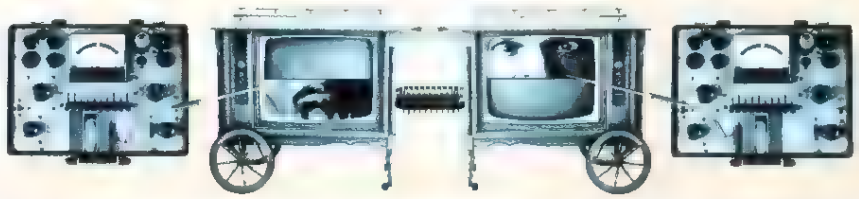
Metabyte PGC

Metabyte, makers of the Wicked3D Voodoo2-based card, recently announced a new "parallel configuration graphics technology" that allows them to run multiple video cards in a parallel, much like the SLI configuration possible with the Voodoo2. It's been touted as "TNT SLI" among other things, so we contacted Kerry Philpott, National Sales and Marketing Manager for Metabyte, to get the full story.

First, we should clarify exactly what the technology is and what it does. Basically, Metabyte has devised a way to divide the screen into a top and bottom half and have one video card render the top half of the screen while another identical video card renders the bottom half. This division of the rendering work is done on the driver level and should be totally invisible to the application. In other words, games won't have to be written to specifically support it. In order to allow the cards to have a single unified display output, a slight board modification is necessary. The technology can even let more than two cards work together, and should have no problem working with digital flat panel displays. This "Parallel Graphics Configuration" is not the same a SLI with Voodoo2 cards, as that configuration has one card render all even numbered lines and another render all the odd numbered lines.

The technology will allow two PCI cards to work together, or even an AGP and a PCI card. In such a setup, the AGP card will simply operate as a PCI card at the faster bus speed of the AGP port (66MHz). Such a configuration will be slightly faster than two PCI cards, but not twice as fast as a single AGP card. The drivers should very intelligently shift the load among the cards in a PGC setup to help achieve an optimal balance, but the bottom line is that games shouldn't really run twice as fast with two cards as they do with one. There should be a very significant speed increase, though.

So when will we be able to run two TNT cards together? Don't get your hopes up just yet. Metabyte is still considering all the options they have for this technology. One option would be to license the driver and hardware technology to independent hardware vendors like NVIDIA or S3 for inclusion in their future reference designs and drivers. Another would be to license the technology to individual OEMs like Diamond or Creative Labs for their particular brand of cards. Naturally, they also have the option of producing cards themselves under the Wicked3D brand, keeping the PGC technology to themselves. The technology can be made to work with virtually any modern 2D/3D video card, and they have it working in their labs on both the TNT and Voodoo Banshee. If Metabyte does decide to deliver a card themselves, they probably won't bother with the TNT if their card will only be delivered within the timeframe of the TNT 2. After all, it would be pointless to buy two TNT cards that would only perform about as well as the single TNT 2. Naturally, other graphics chipsets like S3's Savage4 are being considered as well. ■



Aural Fixation

You want speakers, we got your speakers right here...

Altec Lansing ADA 305

Altec Lansing ADA 880

Still suffering with the tinny, buzzy speakers that came with your PC? The sound in games has been improving steadily, and we now enjoy CD-quality music and sound effects, sometimes even in 3D. This cornucopia of sonic wonders may be lost on you if your speakers aren't up to par. There are still plenty of gamers out there who haven't heard the satisfying hum of the railgun in *Quake II*, or felt a particularly spectacular explosion punch them in the chest with satisfying bass. Retailers are often struggling to shave every dollar off the list price of their PCs, and quality speakers are often the first to go. Not to fear...there are plenty of after-market speakers that will finally make it plain what that hot new sound card is good for.

Testing speakers is difficult, as sound quality is largely subjective. We used several test CDs made to measure frequency response, stereo separation, surround sound support, etc. We also used several music selections ranging from classical to techno to jazz, helping us judge clarity and form a subjective opinion about overall sound quality. Naturally, we used several games as well, listening for key sounds and gauging the overall gaming experience. We also paid careful attention to ergonomic features like controls and connectors. In the end, what was intuitively true was true in fact—better sounding speakers cost more money.

Naturally, we don't expect the inexpensive speakers to sound as good as the bank-breakers, so we've divided our roundup into three price groups. The low-price speakers all cost $99 or less. Mid-price speakers cost between $100 and $199. For those who have thicker wallets or just really want to annoy their neighbors, we've even included a group of high-price speakers ($199 and up) that are sure to rattle your windows.

High-rollers

Altec Lansing ADA 305

Altec Lansing's USB-enabled ADA 305s don't offer the same "no soundcard" capability as Microsoft's DSS-80—you'll still need to hook a sound card up to one of the two inputs. They use USB as an optional connection to your PC to control volume levels via software. The Audio Management Software package that does this has a nice graphical interface that lets you tweak individual speaker volumes or choose from one of eight presets—four predefined and four customizable. The control scheme, whereby a single master-knob on the right speaker controls all the separate volume levels via selector buttons, works very well. Also of note is the "surround sound" mode, which isn't true surround in that there are no speakers behind you, but works far better than most other two-speaker surround options, remaining clear and expanding the sound envelope significantly. As with the Monsoon M-1000s, you'll have a hard time believing the subwoofer isn't actually more powerful than it is, as there's plenty of boom in that box. It seems a waste to pay for USB-enabled speakers that only use the USB for software volume control, though

ADA 305

MANUFACTURER Altec Lansing

MSRP $199

RATING ★★★½☆

Altec Lansing ADA 880

Oh good grief! This is simply too much speaker for most people. The subwoofer sports both a standard 1/8" stereo input and SPDIF input, and connectors for the unit's four speakers. This is a true surround system, with discrete front and rear 10W speakers. The unique quality about this set is the ability to snap the rear speakers off their bases and attach them to the tops of the front speakers for increased stereo power. The unit uses the same master-knob control scheme as the ADA 305s, but with cool green LED lights to give a visual indication of how high/low the volume is cranked. The subwoofer may only be rated at 40W, but it shrugged off everything we threw at it without a single buzz, rattle, or hum, and it sounds like it should be rated 20W higher. If you have downstairs neighbors, they'll rue the day you bought this system and found out that you can recreate the *Jurassic Park* glass-of-water effect. Let's not forget the cordless remote control...a nice feature for those with 21" monitors who actually watch DVD movies on their PC. Spending over $300 on PC speakers may seem ludicrous, but one listen and you'll know where the money went.

ADA 880

MANUFACTURER Altec Lansing

MSRP $329

RATING ★★★★★

COMPUTER GAMES STAMP OF APPROVAL

Creative Labs Cambridge Microworks

You know you're in for a good time when you strain to lift the hefty wood-enclosed sub woofer to move it under your desk. Creative's high-end speakers offer seriously powerful sound with a 42W subwoofer and 13W satellites. The satellites either sit on angle brackets on your desk or attach with included mounting screws to your wall. This is a very no-frills speaker system, with two inputs and no other special options, save for a two-cord volume control puck with an easy-to-read volume knob but no mute button. Sound is rich, full, and powerful. Simply put, these are just plain "really good" speakers, with no bells and whistles but also no disappointments.

CAMBRIDGE MICROWORKS
MANUFACTURER Creative Labs
MSRP $249
RATING ★★★½

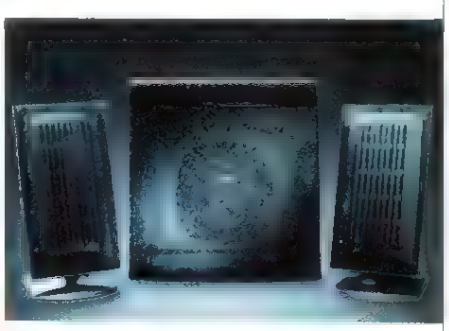
Creative Soundlabs Cambridge Microworks

Monsoon M-1000

Monsoon is perhaps best known for car audio equipment, but they do make one really nice set of non-auto equipment, the M-1000 flat-panel speakers. These sleek black units definitely outstyle the rest of the roundup, and even the 25W subwoofer looks good. Flat-panel speakers are generally more "directional" than cone speakers, and the M-1000s satellites confirm this with superior stereo separation, a benefit to those using a 3D sound card with only two speakers. The 25W subwoofer has response as good as most systems with subs rated 10-15W higher, with clean sound and plenty of punch. The system is a bit thin on the connectivity side, with only two inputs on the back of the sub and home stereo style exposed wire satellite connections. The sub sports a volume control, bass level knob, and bass boost switch, but most users will find the remote puck more enjoyable. It rests easily and freely on the desk with a simple volume control knob and a nice big mute button, with only has one cord attaching it to the sub. All the speaker sets in our high-end category sound great, and the Monsoon's offering is no exception, but superior stereo separation and cool styling make the M-1000s stand out.

M-1000
MANUFACTURER Monsoon
MSRP $199
RATING ★★★★½

COMPUTER GAMES STAMP OF APPROVAL



Monsoon M-1000

Sorta-kinda expensive

Advent AV 390 PL

Advent's mid-priced brother to the AV 190 is far superior in both sound quality and features. The right speaker has a headphone jack and control knobs for volume, treble, and "contour," as well as a DSP toggle switch. The DSP has three modes, one of which is normal stereo and the other two offer fake surround sound (though it doesn't sound that great). Subwoofer volume and unit power is located on the back of the sub. To the AV 190 they've add a second input and doubled the subwoofer wattage, delivering much richer and cleaner bass. Though sound quality isn't quite up to the standards of the ACS 48 or DSS 80 systems, it's still very adequate for a mid-priced system.

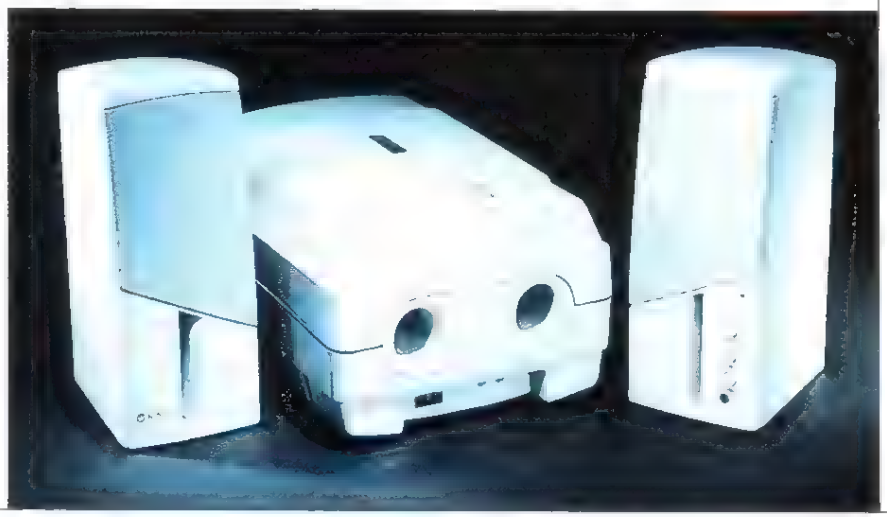
AV390 PL
MANUFACTURER Advent
MSRP $149
RATING ★★★

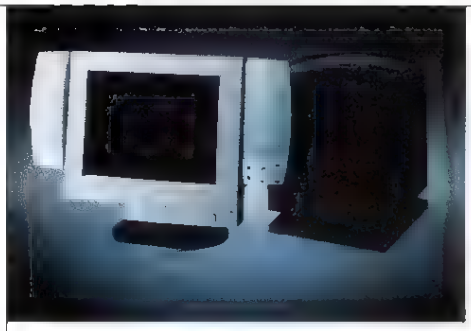
Kinyo SW1271

Kinyo's three-piece set is the least expensive of the mid-priced speakers in our roundup, but they compete well with systems costing a little bit more. The 40W subwoofer emits a barely audible hum when turned up loud, and heavy bass will sometimes get mushy in very busy industrial tunes with high signal content. Generally, this is what you'd expect from a $109 set of speakers, with little that is surprisingly good or bad. Make sure you have floor space for the power brick, though, which is absolutely huge.

SW1271
MANUFACTURER Kinyo
MSRP $109
RATING ★★★½

Kinyo SW1271





Labtec APX 4620

Labtec APX 4620

Labtec's $149 offering sports some impressive-sounding stats: a 4W subwoofer, and two satellites each with a 7.5W midrange driver and a 5.5W tweeter. The right speaker has treble, bass, volume, and 3D sound controls, as well as both a headphone and microphone jack. Furthermore, the speakers ship with monitor mounting brackets. Giving the system a listen, it's somewhat less impressive. The bass doesn't have quite the punch of the ACS48 or DSS 80 systems. High tones aren't quite as crisp as they could be. The 3D Sound implementation suffers the same problem as most speaker sets...it seems to simply add reverb. The APX 4620 isn't a bad-sounding set of speakers by any stretch, and it has nice controls and connections. It's just outclassed a bit by some other mid-priced speakers.

APX 4620
MANUFACTURER Labtec
MSRP $149
RATING ★★★½☆

Logitech Soundman Extreme

Logitech is best known for controllers like mice and joysticks, but their Soundman Extreme speakers fit well into this peripheral line. With a 25W subwoofer that's designed to fit well underneath your monitor and two 12.5W satellites, it can put out some pretty decent sound. The svelte speakers take up little desktop area, with volume, bass, and treble knobs on the right satellite. The subwoofer sports only one input, but it also includes a 1/8" stereo output jack for headphones and the like. Unfortunately, the sound quality is only average for a mid-price speaker set, and with superior-sounding products from Altec Lansing and Microsoft in the same price range, they look downright mediocre by comparison.

SOUNDMAN EXTREME
MANUFACTURER Logitech
MSRP $149
RATING ★★★☆☆

Microsoft Digital Sound System 80

When we originally reviewed the DSS 80, we gave it high marks for innovation and excellent sound quality. It was hurt by a steep MSRP that put it in a category with somewhat superior-sounding equipment, and there are problems inherent with the USB-only connection. To recap that review—using the USB connection as your primary sound source, without using a sound card, gives you cleaner digital sound and nifty software volume and equalizer controls, but has drawbacks. DVD movies won't play over a USB-only connection, nor will digital audio from many SCSI CD ROMs. IDE CD-ROMs and CDs played in a DVD-ROM drives work fine, though. There's also more processor usage than with a good modern sound card, and support for sound-card specific standards like EAX and A3D aren't possible. Still, the system sounds and works great, and using the USB connection is just an option—it works just dandy when hooked up to a sound card in the normal fashion. The DSS 80s also feature nice simple controls and excellent sound. You can do *much* worse for $159.

DIGITAL SOUND SYSTEM 80
MANUFACTURER Microsoft
MSRP $159
RATING ★★★★☆

Digital Sound System 80

Almost affordable

Advent AV 190

Advent's 190 series is a simple three-piece system without a whole lot to offer. The sound output is unimpressive, with weak bass and extreme buzzing in many situations when turned up loud. The right speaker has a simple volume knob and headphone jack, and the subwoofer incorporates the power switch and bass volume controls. There's only one input connector, so those who like to hook up a CD-player or other device to their PC speakers are out of luck. While the price is low, you can do a lot better without spending much more.

AV 190
MANUFACTURER Advent
MSRP $79
RATING ★★☆☆☆

Aiwa SC-C78

Aiwa's two-piece desktop speaker set costs as much as the less-expensive three-piece sets, but boasts a "built in subwoofer" on the left speaker. While this isn't the most amazing bass-producer you'll ever see, it does legitimately sound as good as most budget-priced three piece systems. The right speaker houses all the controls and headphone jack. Q-sound is used to produce "virtual surround" which doesn't really go a long way toward actually expanding the sound stage, but rather produces a pretty clean reverb effect. Though frequency response is pretty good, especially for a two-speaker system, there's isn't quite the same "kick" that better three-piece systems deliver.

SC-C78
MANUFACTURER Aiwa
MSRP $79
RATING ★★★½☆

Benwin BW2000

If you absolutely must have flat-panel speakers, and can't spend more than $100, then these are for you. Everyone else should avoid this set like the plague. A pathetically small and light subwoofer pumps out less bass than most good satellite speakers, and the two satellites have a tendency to give everything the same acoustic properties as singing into a soda bottle. I'll admit that $99 is inexpensive for a pair of flat-panel speakers and they're pretty cool looking at that, but the speakers that came with your computer likely sound better.

BW 2000
MANUFACTURER Benwin
MSRP $99
RATING ★☆☆☆☆

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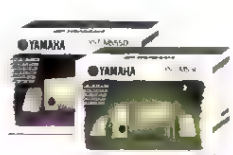

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Benwin BW2000 | PC Works FourPoint Surround | Jensen JMP 54 | Jensen JMP 57 | Labtec 2632 | Yamaha YST MS28

Creative Labs PC Works FourPoint Surround

Simply put, the most complete setup for those desiring four-point sound. Four-point sound is that which accepts separate stereo inputs for the front and rear speakers, and is a big component of new sound cards like the Sound Blaster Live! and Monster Sound MX300. In one box, Creative Labs packages four satellite speakers (two with four meter cords and two with three meter cords), two tripod stands for those with no good place to put rear speakers, wall mounting screws and double-sided tape, and a surprisingly good toaster-sized subwoofer. Overall sound quality is excellent. The biggest gripe is that the volume is controlled through a separate knob attached to both the sound card and subwoofer, and those four wires on your desk can be annoying. This is an amazingly complete and quite good-sounding package for less than $100, and it makes getting a four-point speaker setup going incredibly easy.

PC WORKS FOURPOINT SURROUND
MANUFACTURER Creative Labs
MSRP $99
RATING ★★★★½

COMPUTER GAMES STAMP OF APPROVAL

Jazz Speakers Inferno 3D

Jazz Speakers' budget Inferno 3D speakers are a good bargain at less than $60. The subwoofer is meant to rest on the desktop, and sports the power switch, volume control, and a headphone jack. It also has standard RCA connectors for both left/right front and left/right rear speakers. With the $13 J-3000 surround speaker upgrade, you can get true surround sound for less than $75. While this isn't the true four-point audio that Creative offers, it's affordable surround sound that doesn't sound bad at all for the price. Intense bass will cause rumbling and buzzing, and the lack of separate treble/bass control is a bit annoying. Still, these are better sounding than many inexpensive sets.

INFERNO 3D
MANUFACTURER Jazz Speakers
MSRP $59 (surround speaker upgrade $13)
RATING ★★★½☆

Jazz Speakers J-6502

This two-speaker set sounds surprisingly good even without a subwoofer, but it still tends to rattle when the bass hits hard. It also features a USB connection, allowing you to use them without a sound card if you desire. The "3D sound" option is a joke, doing little to widen the soundscape and creating an incredible amount of hiss. The right speaker has plenty of good controls including a mute button and headphone jack. Still, you can get either a lot more features and better sound for less money. The main draw for these speakers is the USB option—a set of speakers for less than $100 might make buying a computer without a sound card economica

J-6502
MANUFACTURER Jazz Speakers
MSRP $99
RATING ★★★☆☆

Jensen JMP 54

The $59 JMP-54s are very easy on the wallet, but like most two-speaker systems, the lack of a subwoofer causes bass response to suffer. The right speaker sports volume, treble, and bass controls, as well as a headphone jack. There is also an adjustable "foot" on the back of each speaker to adjust the angle, a nice feature for those with especially low desks who want to tilt their speakers up. On songs with lots of mixed strong signal content, the bass causes some pretty serious rattle and buzz, rather than simply not responding at all. If it weren't for that, this would be a great pair of very inexpensive speakers.

JMP 54
MANUFACTURER Jensen
MSRP $59
RATING ★★★☆☆

Jensen JMP 57

Jensen remedies the main problem with the JMP-54s with the addition of a 15W subwoofer that will cost you $20 more. The satellites mimic those of the JMP-54s, but with the bass level moved to the subwoofer and no separate treble control. The headphone jack and adjustable feet are still there, though. While the subwoofer helps improve the poor bass response of it's two-speaker cousin, the JMP-57 would have benefited more from a slightly higher-grade sub. Bass response is still poor at very low frequencies, and songs with lots of signal content can often cause the same annoying buzz heard with the JMP 54s. While you're not likely to be floored by the sound from this unit, the price is definitely right.

JMP 57
MANUFACTURER Jensen
MSRP $59
RATING ★★★½☆

Labtec LCS 2632

Labtec's low-cost speaker solution is a reasonable set of speakers, but nothing to write home about. The 20W subwoofer is made to sit on the desktop, and sports the volume, treble, bass, 3D sound, power, and mute controls. Though bass response is pretty good for a low-cost speaker set, things can get a bit muddy when there's a lot going on. The mute button also functions in the dubious manner of cutting the volume down very low, rather than truly muting all sound. Sound quality is generally as good as you can expect from $99 speakers, but the LCS 2632 aren't nearly the incredible value that Creative's four-point system is.

LCS 2632
MANUFACTURER Labtec
MSRP $99
RATING ★★★

Yamaha YST MS28

Yamaha delivers are very solid set of speakers for a $79 MSRP. Like most less-expensive speakers, the subwoofer in this three-piece set is made to sit on the desktop. It doesn't deliver really powerful bass or fantastic response, getting a little "buzzy" with lots of strong mixed signal content. Otherwise, the sound is surprisingly clear and clean, with well-defined mid-range frequencies. The system has one major design flaw, the volume and power controls. The two satellite speakers rest on hinges that make it easy to adjust their angle, but the short, smooth volume knob and power switch located on the top of the right speaker make it very difficult to adjust them without inadvertently closing those hinges. ■

YST MS28
MANUFACTURER Yamaha
MSRP $79
RATING ★★★½

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Expansion

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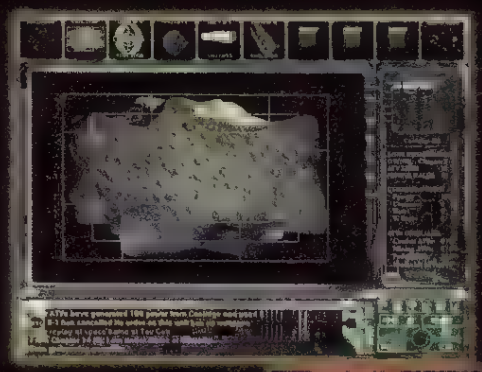
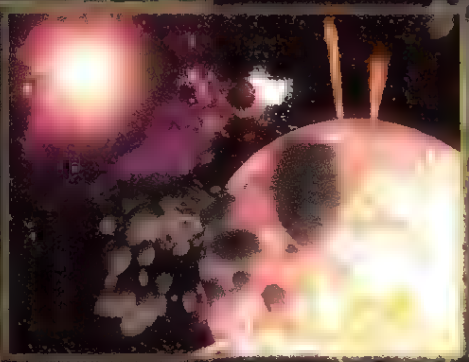


Dynamic 3D solar system with all asteroids in constant orbital motion creates unique challenges as resources and territory move over time.



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X-Wing Alliance

Obi Wan has taught you well

With the release date of *Star Wars: Episode I—The Phantom Menace* looming so close that you can practically feel the trembling of the Force, it doesn't take much to get people excited for anything *Star Wars*. That is fortunate for LucasArts, because there are probably at least a few fans still grumbling over their disappointment with the previous entry into the series. *X-Wing vs Tie Fighter* was not a terrible game, but aside from some relatively basic multiplayer features and a largely unrelated collection of missions, it offered little to get excited about While it is not entirely clear whether fans had been hoping for a full-blown solo campaign or some sort of story-driven multiplayer mode, it was evident that *X-Wing vs. Tie Fighter* failed to deliver either

Let it not be said that LucasArts and Totally Games do not listen to feedback Even before you have made it through the opening credits it is apparent that they have tried to make *X-Wing Alliance* into the game that fans had hoped its predecessor would be Better still, once you start to dig into the stuff that comes after the credits, you will discover that to a large extent they have succeeded

Where *X-Wing vs. Tie Fighter* was a study in minimalism, *Alliance* revels in options. The multiplayer features remain largely unchanged, but the addition of a "skirmish" mode allows players to quickly generate custom missions and fly any of 28 ships. Once again the game is being featured on the *MSN Gaming Zone*—if they wish, players can host Internet games without using the *Zone*, but Microsoft's service does make for a convenient place to meet up with other players In addition to the skirmish scenarios, there is a racing mode in which players can compete with each other by flying through an obstacle course of armed hoops reminiscent of the flight training course from the original *X-Wing*. The racing mode and the skirmish scenarios can both be played solo, and the single player campaign scenarios can be selected and replayed at will after you complete them.

Speaking of single player, the game features a monster of a single player campaign (just over 50 missions), and boasts what is possibly the best story yet in the series The protagonist is one Ace Azzameen, youngest son in a family of traders, pining to join the Rebellion (as any good hero should). In the beginning you will just be taking care of family business, flying a series of introductory missions in either the Otana or the Sabra, two of the Azzameen family transports. While the Otana is the better ship of the two, the Sabra is kissing cousins with a far more legendary YT-1300 transport, and watching space fly by from inside that familiar cockpit is well worth the price of admission

Events eventually transpire that bring the youngest Azzameen into the Rebel fold, and from there the story takes on a dual nature. The player will get the opportunity to jump into the cockpit of a variety of starfighters—the X-Wing, the A-Wing, the Y-Wing, the B-Wing, and the venerable Z-95 Headhunter—and fly military missions for the Rebel Alliance. Interspersed with these are the occasional family mission, flown in one of the two transports (apparently the Alliance does not allow pilots to borrow fighters for private business) The Rebel missions tell the story behind events leading up to the Battle of Endor—the evacuation of Hoth, the discovery of the Death Star by the Bothan spy network, and even the acquisition of the Imperial shuttle used to ferry Han Solo and company to the surface of Endor. The family missions balance it out and keep things from feeling too impersonal, painting a more intimate picture of the Azzameens' struggle to hold onto their business and keep their family

X-WING ALLIANCE

GENRE Space Simulation

PUBLISHER LucasArts

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98, 200MHz Pentium or higher, 32MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM

MULTIPLAYER 2-8 players, Internet, LAN, modem, serial

RATING ★★★★½

UPSIDE

Near-perfect blend of story and action

DOWNSIDE

A few mission bugs, high system requirements

[top left] The Azzameen family space station... could they be Quake fans?

[above] The ship database is available once you join the Rebel Alliance, and is updated as new ship types are discovered

[left] Did we just jump into hyperspace, or are the cockpit oxygen levels getting low?

THE BUZZ

I can't believe they didn't include the option to remap the keys. Some heads would roll for this if it were up to me.

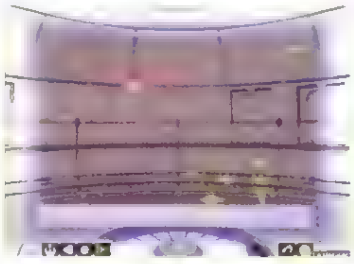
—Fraz Akhtar

The graphics are pretty nice, but at times bit choppy even on my 450MHz Pentium II with a Voodoo² and full detail. The AI for the enemy seems really improved—a little too much, in fact.

—Adam Vaughan

I think the graphics are great, easily the best in Star Wars game yet, and it sure beats Wing Commander Prophecy.

—AJN_REBEL



"Super Star Destroyer"... three words that you never, ever want to see in a mission briefing

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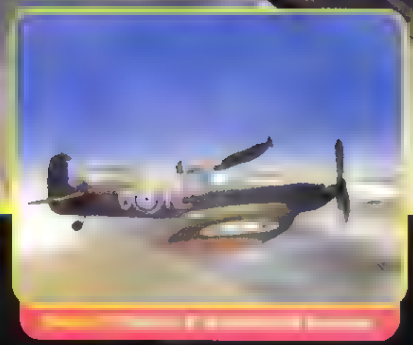

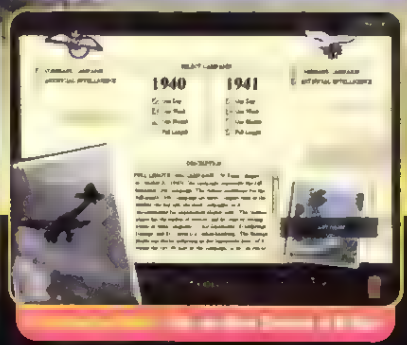

Actual screens may vary.

TALONSOFT

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alive and united amidst the escalating chaos of war. It is a remarkably compelling mixture—don't be surprised to find yourself actually caring about what happens to the various members of your family (possibly even caring enough to question why one of your brothers has a thick Scottish accent).

Of course the story is only the vessel for the real meat of the game... space combat. What good is a story if you can't blow things up? Not to worry—*X-Wing Alliance* gives you the opportunity to blow things up spectacularly and often (although one thing that tends to blow up with great recurring frequency is your own ship). Much of the mechanics from *X-Wing vs. Tie Fighter* have carried over, from the furious pace of the action to the quirky flight dynamics that allow ships to turn faster at lower speeds. Energy management is as important as ever—more so, perhaps, since the basic maintenance levels do little other than hold the status quo, and constant management is required to keep your ship powered for the task at hand. While this is not the only space sim to offer energy management controls, it is perhaps the best game yet at forcing players to use them.

One feature that could use a little work is the targeting controls—despite a dizzying array of different targeting options, the designers seem to have missed a few obvious ones. The "O" key targets the nearest objective, but there is no key to scroll through objectives. Since many missions feature more than one mission critical ship, it seems odd that you only have the means to target the nearest one. Others have to be found by using the generic "T" targeting key, and you may find yourself spending many precious combat moments scrolling through dozens of cargo containers and irrelevant ships to find the one that you need. The ability to target ships by type would also be useful—the importance of being able to quickly locate a fighter, bomber, or starship (depending on your need) can not be overstated.

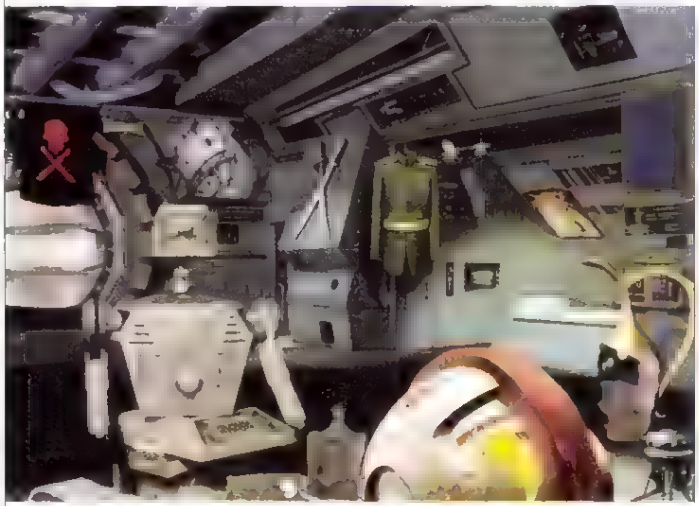
While the virtual cockpits offered for each ship may seem like eye candy, they highlight one very useful feature that has been added to the game—a padlock view. Long the sole domain of flight simulators, this feature comes in very handy in space (where dogfights tend to be a little more three-dimensional). The view out of those cockpits is equally pleasing. While the game's graphics are not quite on par with other recent space sims like *Wing Commander Prophecy* and *Descent Freespace*, they are not far off. The game excels at subtle touches with dynamic light sources, colored engine glow, and detailed ship models. Unlike its predecessor, it supports 3D acceleration out of the box, and while it runs moderately well on machines of the 200 MHz variety, you will want a solid Pentium II and a good 3D card to see it in all of its high-resolution mip-mapped glory.

The missions are mostly well crafted, and will appeal to anyone who enjoyed the missions in *Tie Fighter* and the original *X-Wing*. The same frustrations from those games are present as well, although *X-Wing Alliance* takes at least a few steps towards addressing some of them. The missions often tend towards the difficult side, and some of them are insidiously challenging. Coupled with a linear campaign structure, in which you must win to progress, this has provoked no small amount of head banging and hair tearing in past titles. While not entirely absent, the designers have given players a "leave of absence" option that allows them to skip up to three of the Rebel missions over the course of the single player campaign. No similar option exists for family missions, unfortunately, although the player can toggle mission difficulty and ship invulnerability to help make a tough mission easier to crack.

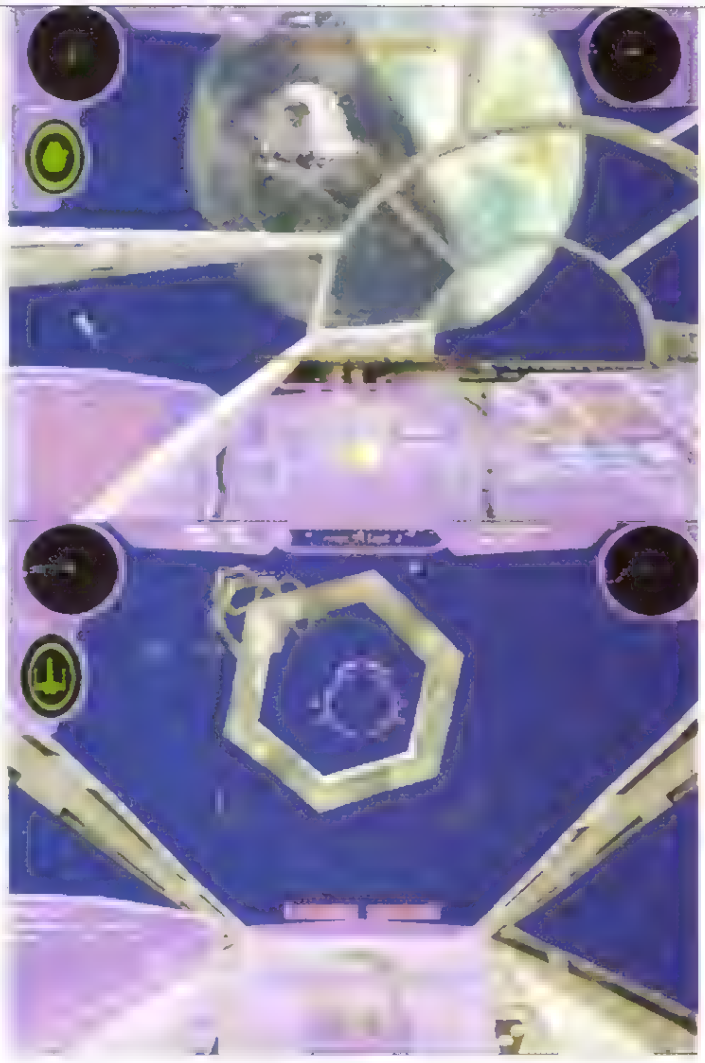
Unfortunately you may have a reason to use these "leaves of absence" that has nothing to do with mission difficulty. A small number of missions seem to have some rather irritating bugs that can make completing them something of chore. In several missions, your wingmen give you erroneous information, often leading you to believe that you have completed mission objectives that are actually still incomplete. One MFD option shows which victory conditions remain to be completed, so it is possible to avoid any trouble from this bug by staying alert, but it is still a bit annoying. More troublesome is the elusive suicide bug that sometimes causes mission critical craft to mysteriously self-destruct. These sort of bugs and logic errors do not crop up often—only in three or four out of more than fifty single player missions—but even a few times is enough to be annoying, especially when so many of the missions are so difficult to begin with.

It is a testament to the quality of the design that the game keeps you coming back for more despite a few shortcomings like these. Make no mistake—minus the bugs, *X-Wing Alliance* is a near-perfect game. Even with them, it's an addictive package that any fan of the series is sure to enjoy... at least until the *Episode* games start hit the stores. Until then, may the Force be with us all. —*Benjamin E. Sones*

The Otana looks nice and has it where it counts



No, this isn't the set from Sanford and Son... Ace just has an eye for flashy souvenirs



[top] "That thing's operational!"

[bottom] The racecourse is similar to the flight-training course from X-Wing; you can even race other ships in multiplayer

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- Game Industry News

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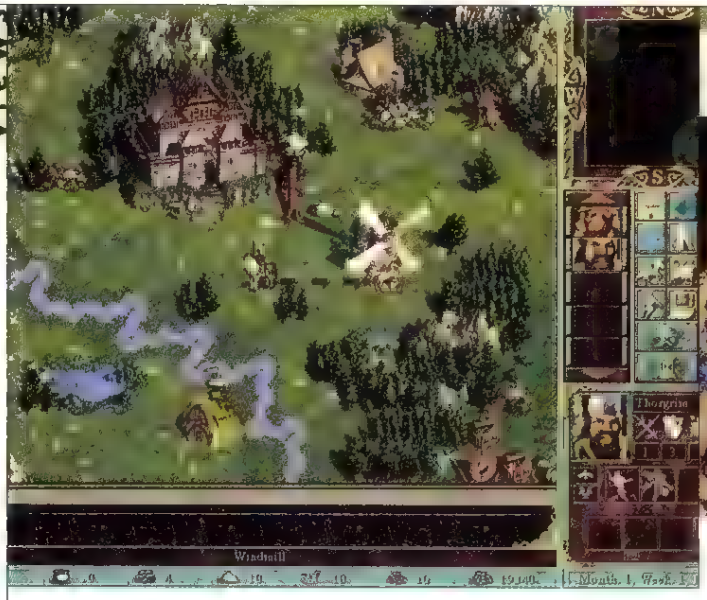
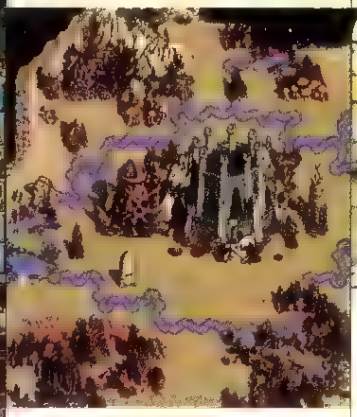


It'll charm you, baffle you, and devour your personal life like a barbecued cocktail weenie

If you want to avoid divorce, you'll need two copies and a home network



[left] From the top of a Redwood Observatory, your hero can see the surrounding land

[middle] Subterranean tunnels allow your enemies (or you) to build armies in the hidden darkness and emerge, like a pack of conquering mole-rats, into the light of victory

[right] The scenario goals are extremely imaginative and wildly varied. No monotony here...

Heroes of Might and Magic III

With the Restoration of Erathia, the third time's a charm

COMPUTER GAMES STAMP OF APPROVAL

If a single Rule of Sequels exists for the computer entertainment industry, it is carved in the stone of common wisdom: "Any successful sequel must take a radical step away from the previous game, either in technology or design. Anything less will fail to catch the jaded eye of an over-saturated market, and be doomed to slow fossilization on the bargain rack." This very basic principle has driven practically every hit series of the last decade, and produced some astounding quantum leaps in game development.

Thank goodness the folks at 3DO have never heard of it!

The Restoration of Erathia, latest installment in 3DO's *Heroes of Might and Magic* series, not only gracefully breaks the Rule of Sequels, but makes you question its very existence. There is nothing in *Heroes III* which can be considered a drastic departure—no *Myth*-like 3D terrain, no obligatory switch to real-time, not even an altered storyline. In both spirit and design, this game stays eminently true to its predecessors. And yet it still manages to deliver a unique, engrossing, and monstrously addictive experience.

Like the previous *Heroes* titles, *The Restoration of Erathia* is a turn-based game with three components. The first, an overhead regional map, focuses mainly on exploration and acquisition of resources. The second, a close-up view of your city or dungeon, allows you to construct and upgrade helpful structures, recruit human soldiers or loyal monsters, and hire new heroes to lead your troops into battle. And the last, a hex-grid local map, pits army against army in strategic confrontation. These three elements are seamlessly integrated into an intuitive, elegant interface which is accessed completely by mouse.

The concept is simple—you begin a map with a certain number of towns and at least one hired hero. The towns can be upgraded to produce monsters, gold, and various helpful effects. The hero (and any others that you might employ) will act as your emissary in the land of Erathia. Riding into the unknown mists, he can explore the map, collect loose resources and forgotten artifacts, enlist the help of mines to produce daily resources for your towns, and visit a variety of seers, sages, witches, and faeries. Each hero is also the general of his own little conquering army, which can be customized by adding different monsters and human soldiers produced by your towns. A hero and his troops can battle random monsters, attack enemy heroes, or lay siege to towns and castles. In a nod to the role-playing origins of the *Might and Magic* series, each hero becomes more capable with experience, and will learn new skills and spells to help in your quest.

The game's story should also be familiar to players of *Heroes II* or *Might and Magic VI*. Catherine, the queen of Enroth and wife of the ever-unlucky King Roland Ironfist, has returned to her home kingdom of Erathia. She intends only to attend the funeral of her father, King Gryphonheart, but quickly discovers that his death has unsettled the delicate political balance of the region. Erathia's greedy neighbors, knowing the weakness of a leaderless kingdom, have already begun to invade. To prevent the further slaughter of her father's beloved subjects, Catherine takes up his banner and rides to restore Erathia's traditional borders.

New to *Heroes III* are updated graphics, bigger combat screens, and a paper-doll inventory system, plus a host of additional towns, spells, creatures, and (what else?) heroes. Subterranean tunnels now twist below the familiar surface map, providing a sneaky means of moving troops from one area to another. Those ubiquitous (and usually well-defended) puzzle obelisks now point the way to nothing less than The Grail itself. Once unearthed, this legendary artifact will allow you to create a fantastic new structure in one of your towns—often the powerful edge that wins a scenario. Sages and seers now offer mini-quests for lesser artifacts, and a helpful Quest Log is provided to

THE BUZZ

I like the game in a way I never liked its predecessors. Dunno why exactly, but maybe the balance and the strategy make a little more sense to me.
—Jeff Vitous

I love this game... but I have painfully little time to play. I have a map I want to design, and two games running right now...
—Joe Ryan

The AI is about the best I have seen in a strategy game, and that includes both Civilization games and Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri.
—Matt Martin

HEROES OF MIGHT AND MAGIC III: THE RESTORATION OF ERATHIA

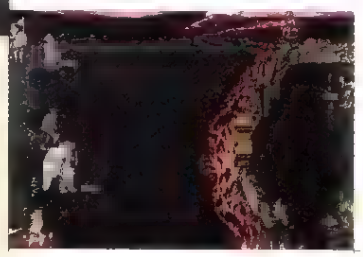
GENRE: Strategy

PUBLISHER: 3DO

REQUIREMENTS: Windows 95/98/NT4.0, 133 MHz Pentium or higher, 32MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM

MULTIPLAYER: 2-8 players, Internet, LAN, modem, serial, hotseat

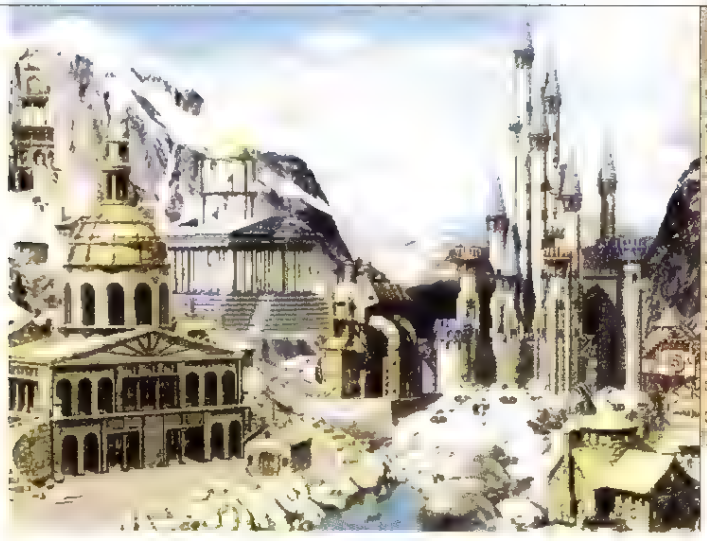
RATING: ★★★★★

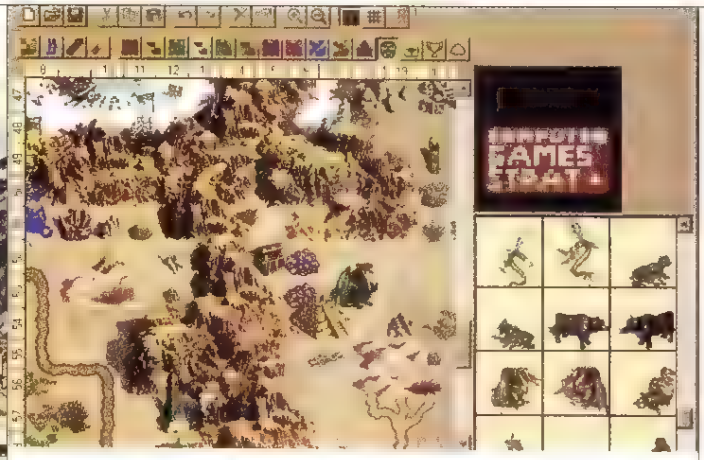


Winged troops are invaluable when besieging an enemy's castle or dungeon

Discuss the game at www.cgmag.com/Home/forum/cgboard/webx?13@@.eedad8e

For tips and cheats, check out www.cgmag.com/Home/content/tips.htm





[left to right] New city and monster types add greatly to the fun of exploration; With the built-in map editor, you can tailor Erathia to suit your tastes, or create an entirely new continent (ours is called Steveland)

keep track of everything you've been asked to retrieve

The new towns offer a greatly expanded range of building types and monster generators. Each town type also produces two varieties of hero, one geared towards traditional force (might) and the other towards arcane pursuits (magic... sensing a theme here?). The monsters, both old and new, provide a splendid variety of troop types and special abilities. Some monsters, for example, can blind their opponents, while others entangle them or cause temporary petrifaction. Those with multiple heads can attack multiple, adjacent targets at once. Flying creatures ignore terrain obstacles, and some troops simply teleport across the battlefield. But each ability has its counter: troglodytes, for example, have no eyes and are therefore immune to blindness

The overall bestiary is carefully balanced, avoiding the notion of a single "ultimate beast" which can defeat everything else. In any battle between reasonably matched armies of differing types, tactics will win out over creature composition every time

Although over forty individual scenarios are available for play, the real meat of *Heroes III* lies in its multi-tiered campaign. Three small sub-campaigns, each with a few well-crafted maps, are available at the start of the game. One puts you in control of Queen Catherine's Erathian defense, another casts you as a demonic overlord attempting continental conquest, and the third gives you a chance to indulge your greedy, mercenary tendencies. Once you have completed all three, additional sub-campaigns become available, eventually giving you the opportunity to play every side in the epic war for Erathia.

This *Starcraft*-esque approach works extremely well, and the low number of maps in any given sub-campaign means that you are never more than a few hours away from a glorious feeling of accomplishment. In addition, the single-player aspect is graced by a thoroughly polished and occasionally fiendish enemy AI. Although it does seem to cheat a bit at higher levels, it never gives you the impression of being unrealistically strong or omniscient. Actually, for novice players, *Heroes III* is a far more accessible game than its predecessor, since the AI "goes easy on you" for the first few campaign scenarios

On the other hand, if you prefer your challengers alive and tauntable, *Heroes III* offers not only the standard modem/LAN/Internet play functions, but an eight-person hot-seat option as well

And, finally, for the conquering hero who chows through every scenario in the box and still hungers for more, an extremely intuitive built-in map editor allows the creation of new regions and scenarios. (Unfortunately, no random map generator is included in this installment of the series, but new user-created maps are popping up on the Internet practically every day.)

Technically, the game seems solid and very well-balanced. Although some users, particularly those on AMD-based systems, have reported various issues, we saw not a single crash during our entire review (*Heroes III* even shared a 32-meg system with the Great Pig *Photoshop* and failed to lock up, which is nothing short of an attributable miracle.) The few oddities we did encounter were related to the campaign progression, and tended to be of the minor "hey, where's my bonus?" variety.

Bucking the tide of recent strategy releases, *Heroes III* even runs remarkably well on its designated minimum system. We tested on a lower-end Pentium and found smooth animation, unbroken music, and speedy play. Not just during our own movements, either—in a welcome break from turn-based tradition, *Heroes III* doesn't bog down excessively during AI turns. To put the icing on the feature-rich cake, it even includes an option to disable enemy movement animations, thus reducing their turn time even further

Speaking of which, this considerate little feature epitomizes the apparent design philosophy of *Heroes of Might and Magic III*: "If it makes the game more playable, put it in." Helpful extras abound, from extensive right-click descriptions and a comprehensive scenario information screen, to a handy quick-combat feature for players who don't want to handle the details of battle themselves. The tutorial is friendly and cleverly constructed, and the first three sub-campaigns systematically demonstrate every important heroing skill

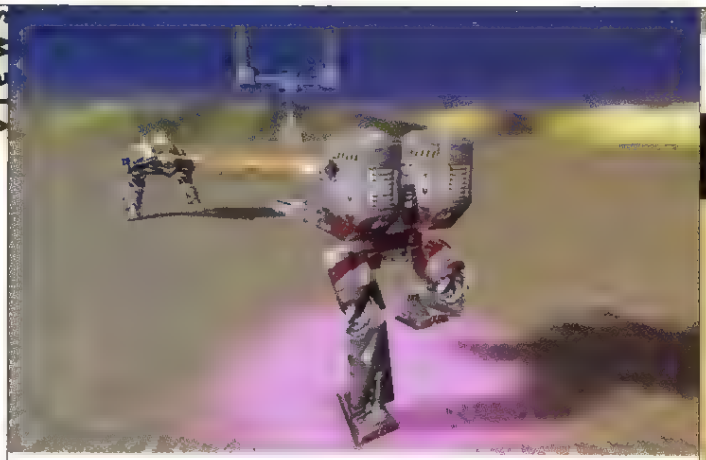
Even the manual is well-written, comprehensive, lengthy... and blissfully unnecessary. The game itself is so self-explanatory that a four-year-old could easily figure out the controls, yet devious enough to give the most veteran strategist a few more gray hairs. This attention to gameplay is what sets *Heroes III* apart from most of its competitors (and leaves you repeating "just one more turn" until dawn breaks or the Mountain Dew runs out)

Overall, *Heroes of Might and Magic III* is a treat for *Heroes* fans and newcomers alike. Between the solid, familiar gameplay and the well-designed improvements, this is one of those rare titles which just does everything right

So if you're looking for a turn-based challenge which will charm you, baffle you, and devour your personal life like a barbecued cocktail weenie, this is the game to do it! —*Cindy Vanous*

[right] A fiendish map puzzler—you own that offshore angel rig, but have no boat to get there!

[below] Some campaigns allow you to carry heroes from one scenario to the next, allowing them to advance to impressive experience levels

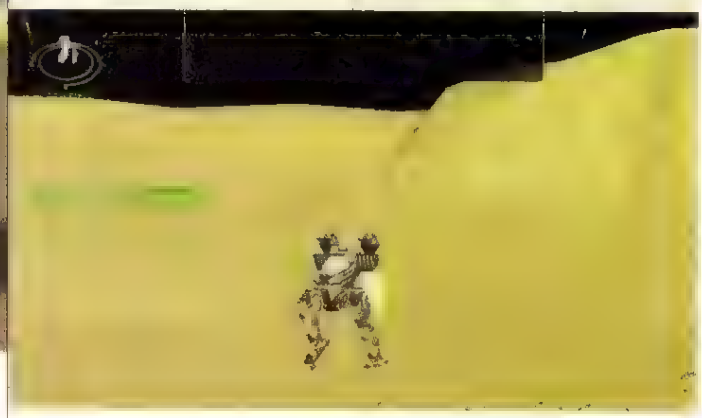


UPSIDE

Decent graphics and excellent weapon effects. Seamless multiplayer

DOWNSIDE

This is a single-player game too, right? Non-existent AI, poor balance, excessive Mark Hamil



[left] One of the multiplayer options is a Team Football game

[above] Each weapon has a distinctive graphics, such as these green electricity balls from a Blink Gun

Starsiege

You got your first person shooter in my giant robot game!

The first of the next generation of giant robot games has arrived with a thud. *Starsiege* may have beat *MechWarrior 3*, *Heavy Gear II* and *Slave Zero* to the shelves, but otherwise it doesn't contribute much to the genre, feeling like a mere retooling of Activision's *MechWarrior 2* with a robust set of multiplayer features and a modest suit of new clothes. It's not very well balanced, it has a criminally underdone single player game, and worst of all it's just not much fun.

Starsiege is the latest installment in Sierra's version of the *Battletech* universe. Like *Battletech*, this universe imagines a future in which warring factions duke it out in giant bipedal robots, a concept that makes no sense militarily but looks great on a battlefield. Since the term Mech is already taken, Sierra's bipeds are called HERCs. No, it doesn't stand for anything.

At first glance, *Starsiege* seems to use a balanced system of weapon types and tech levels. There is an immense amount of detail when it comes to building your vehicles. You can even choose skins to put the finishing touch on your vehicles with a custom coat of paint. The devil is indeed in the detail. The building interface is fairly clunky, and the game takes poor advantage of its tremendous variety—there is little evidence of balance in all this minutiae. Many, if not most, of the weapons, chassis, and components are useless. The weapons don't seem very well thought out either. Mounting both anti-shield and anti-armor weapons would be an effective and flexible combination if there were any indication of when you should use either weapon. Tactical considerations like weapon variety, stealth, and countermeasures all take the backseat to simply spitting ammo and energy weapons at your opponent.

The multiplayer game, which is better suited to this frantic attacking, is smooth and easy to use. But the other side of this coin is painfully evident during single player games, which seem little more than an afterthought. It consists of two campaigns. The first is a fairly engaging progression from fighting police units to Imperial troops to hi-tech Cybrid invaders. The second is far more interesting, played from the Cybrid side, but prohibitively difficult. The game intro is a sharp little cinematic chillingly narrated by an eerie child's voice, but then Mark Hamil steps in to read the mission briefings. You'll be on the middle of your seat waiting for this supposedly battle-hardened character to whine about going to Tachi Station to pick up some power converters. Perhaps Gary Berghoff will be available for the expansion pack.

The mission structures are the same old sleepy stuff: go here, kill these guys, then go there and kill those guys. Occasionally you'll have to defend a target or play a frustrating timed mission over and over. But the most damning indictment of the game's disregard for single-player is the almost complete absence of AI. Enemy vehicles behave identically, charging at you no matter what weapons they have and running away when they're damaged. In many instances, you'll be within clear visual range of a vehicle, but until you fire at it or step into its activation radius, it will conveniently ignore you. Enemies sometimes take the "don't just do something, stand there!" approach, freezing up so you can kill them without having to lead your target.

At times, *Starsiege* is attractive. The terrain rolls gently and the sky looks suitably ethereal. The spindly Cybrid units look dramatically different from the blocky human HERCs. Weapon effects, especially the spectacular beam weapons, are impressive. But then you note the cartoon gaudy vehicle textures, the fairly anemic terrain engine with an odd rock stuck in the middle of nowhere (this is called "detail"), and the languid floaty physics model in which items blow up and fall apart as if they were underwater. Worst of all is the way these vehicles have no sense of size or heft.

And here is where *Starsiege* ultimately fails. What's a giant robot game without giant robots? In this case, it's stuck uncomfortably between being a robot game and a first person shooter. The gameplay is fast and curiously dull. It's not as slow as a typical robot combat game, but it's not as exciting as something like *Quake* or *TRIBES*. The intent was obviously to straddle two genres. The result is a game lost in the crack between them. —*Tom Chick*

STARSIEGE

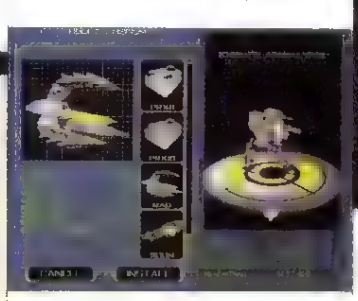
GENRE Big Robot Action

PUBLISHER Sierra

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98, 166MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM

MULTIPLAYER 2-20 players, Internet, LAN

RATING ★★½☆☆



The Vehicle Depot buries important information one click too deep

Most of the cinematics are rendered with the game engine

Demo: the game at www.cdmag.com/articles/[illegible]/demo.htm

Download the demo at www.cdmag.com/articles/[illegible]/demo.htm

For tips and cheats check out www.cdmag.com/Home/content.php.htm

UPSIDE

It'll bring back those childhood memories you've long suppressed: acne, chalk, scabby knees...

DOWNSIDE

Couldn't they make it look more... plastic? And the controls are still problematic

Army Men II

Biologists divide the human species into two main subspecies: those that played with plastic army men as kids, and those who didn't. If you did then *Army Men II* will, at the very least, elicit all kinds of fond nostalgic remembrances.

Mostly action, with a smattering of real time strategy thrown in for variety, *Army Men II* puts you in charge of green army man "Sarge" and his platoon of cannon-fodder. The prequel was taken to task for not going far enough with the milieu, and 3DO has rectified that to a certain extent. You battle the evil tan army across a variety of battlefields from our world and theirs. In their world, units are to scale with trees and such, but when they come through a portal to our world, they'll be mixing it up across kitchen counters, hobby tables and garden landscapes. It would've needed more if they'd beefed up the graphics a bit. If ever there was a game that would benefit from the "hyper-realistic" rendered look, *Army Men II* is it.

More damning, the controls are iffy, too. You've got two options for controlling Sarge: directly with the keyboard or by clicking with the mouse *a la Diablo*. Neither is as crisp as it should be, and since both are always active, it can get pretty confusing. However, once you get the hang of it, controlling Sarge can be quite entertaining. He can carry six different items, and as he switches from a rifle to say, a mortar, his pose morphs into the right pose for army men aficionados. The graphic effects are plastic, but in a good way.

In addition to the single player campaign, a nice variety of multiplayer games are offered, and for those times when you just don't feel like dealing with the online crowd, they can be played against AI opponents.

Overall, *Army Men* is a good effort. A lot of the fun comes from revisiting these toys that we had such fun with as kids. Once the nostalgia wears off, the game starts to become less interesting, and the glitches mentioned start becoming more annoying. A patch addressing some of these would do the game wonders, but in any case it's a worthwhile buy for collectors or if you see it in the bargain bin.

—Peter Smith

ARMY MEN II

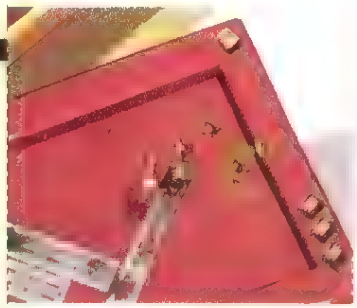
GENRE Action/Strategy

PUBLISHER 3DO

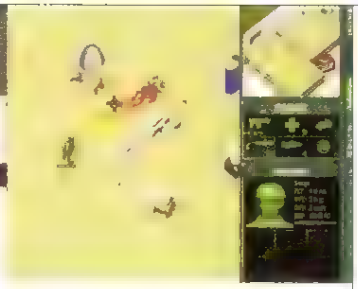
REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98, 90MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM

MULTIPLAYER 2-4 players, Internet, LAN, modem, serial

RATING ★★★½

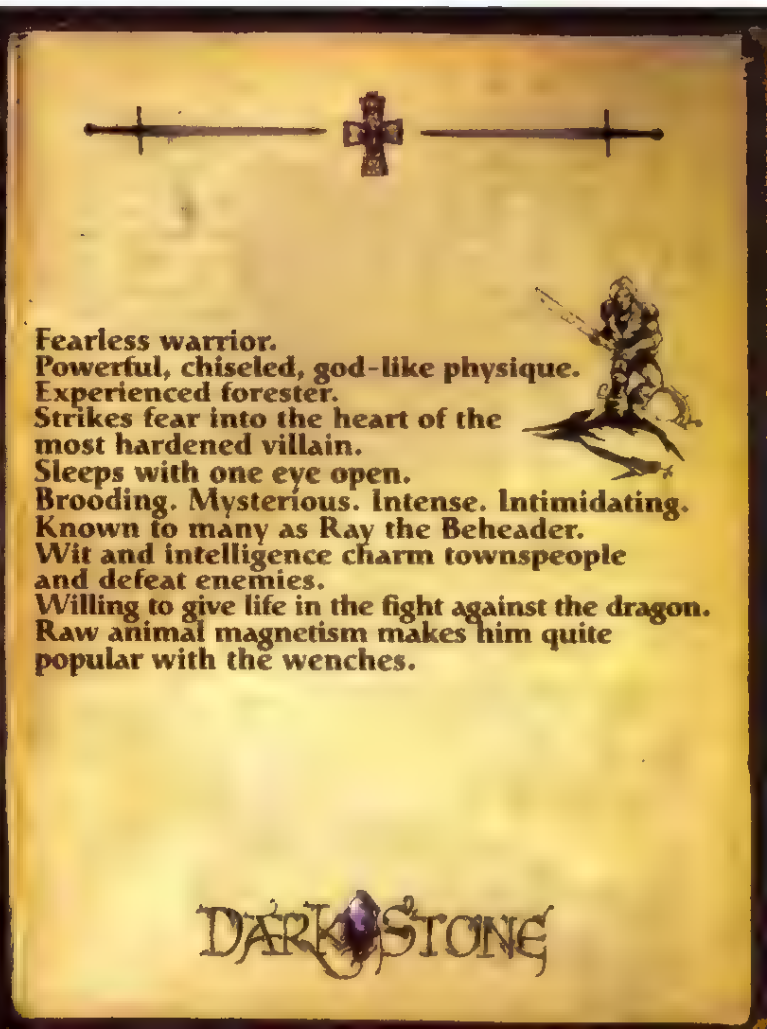


Recognize these poses!?



[left] This is gonna hurt... (scene from a cutscene)

[above] A flamethrower! And what's this kid doing with a cigarette lighter on his hobby table!?


Fearless warrior.
Powerful, chiseled, god-like physique.
Experienced forester.
Strikes fear into the heart of the most hardened villain.
Sleeps with one eye open.
Brooding. Mysterious. Intense. Intimidating.
Known to many as Ray the Beheader.
Wit and intelligence charm townspeople and defeat enemies.
Willing to give life in the fight against the dragon.
Raw animal magnetism makes him quite popular with the wenches.
DARKSTONE

UPSIDE

Surprisingly good representation of the show. And, in short bursts, "it kicks ass, man."

DOWNSIDE

Mindless repetition is boring. Mindless repetition is boring. Mindless repetition is boring...

[left] Getting the drop on Jesus and Satan in deathmatch

[center] Please, I beg you, make the turkeys stop!

[above] Now you've made the naughty list

[below] Stop by Chef's Shack o' Love for some advice

South Park

"Chef, those turkeys suck big portions of ass!" -Stan

Unless you've been living under a rock for the last year, you know all about the phrase "Oh my god, they killed Kenny!" Comedy Central's hit series *South Park* has taken the paper cut-out animation and offensive juvenile hijinks of four grade-school kids and turned them into an empire. You can find *South Park* shirts, mugs, stuffed dolls, soundtracks, keychains, and every other cheesy merchandising stand-by littering the walls of dozens of stores. There's even a *South Park* movie on the way. Not since *Beavis and Butt-head* has crass youth humor been so popular. It's only fitting that we're treated to a game based on the series, but a 3D shooter?

When the *South Park* game was officially announced, skeptics wondered whether the look and feel of the series would carry over well to the third dimension. Surprisingly, it works—the *Turok 2* engine proves up to the task of recreating *South Park's* simple characters and environments. Framerates are smooth and the ever-present wall of fog has been pushed back to a respectable distance. The textures and characters are incredibly basic, but this approach works quite well. The characters simply look like the cardboard cutout characters given depth, and the town of South Park appears just as you would imagine it. It's simply hard to imagine a 3D game that would look *more* like the show.

Toss in plenty of taunts, quips, and one-liners from series stars Matt Stone, Trey Parker, and Issac Hayes, along with a too-cute soundtrack, and the game even sounds like an episode of the show. If anything, it's even more foul, with fewer curse words bleeped out.

Unfortunately, it takes more than a game that is very *South Park* to make a game that is very good. The general gameplay revolves around the idea of saving the town of South Park from "Tank" enemies. In each level, there are hundreds upon hundreds of regular enemies, nearly all of them of the same type, and a few larger "tank" enemies that are much more difficult to kill. When wounded enough, the Tanks will run away. After each stage, you have to kill all the Tank enemies that got by before they destroy the town. Fail, and it's game over. While this doesn't necessarily make the game bad, it certainly makes it repetitive. Most gamers probably won't get far enough to see many enemy types, as getting past the first few levels requires a Herculean effort. At the very beginning of the game, the player wades through horde upon horde of evil mutant turkeys (and the occasional angry cow), and after that level, you'll swear you've somehow managed to buy a game based on *When Animals Attack*. But it doesn't end there—the next stage is full of even *more* turkeys, and the one after that...still more! If there was ever a good case against free-range poultry, *South Park's* first few levels are it. While a little more enemy variety creeps in as the game goes on, this monotonous repetitive "kill the same thing a million times over" theme permeates the game, making it incredibly tedious.

The game's Nintendo 64 roots tend to show up in annoying places. Games can only be saved between levels. Options to change screen resolution aren't readily available, and extra accoutrements like demo recording or custom player skins are missing as well. The menu system is obviously straight from a console, with the exception of the fantastic keyboard setup screen.

Fortunately, multiplayer play is actually quite entertaining. While the level design is a bit on the simple side, the verbal abuse delivered by the 24 different show characters available in deathmatch provides enough chuckles to keep the game from being a total wash-out. *Quake* lovers who are fans of the show might be distracted by this games multiplayer play for a short while, as the cute and gore-less weapons are actually pretty satisfying and balanced well, but after a week or two the novelty will wear off and the flaws will show. The game lacks any sort of crouch or walk/run capability and levels tend to lack complexity, making the game accessible to a wider audience but too simple for hardcore shooter fans.

Like any game based on a TV show, you have to be a fan of the show to appreciate the game. *South Park* fans should find a few hours of mirth in online deathmatching, which works quite well over the Internet with a standard modem connection. But the simplistic design and tedious single-player game will only annoy shooter fans. *—Jason Cross*

SOUTH PARK

GENRE 3D Action

PUBLISHER Acclaim

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98, 266MHz Pentium II, 32MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM

MULTIPLAYER 2-8 players, Internet, LAN

RATING ★★½

THE BUZZ

Now all that is left to do is to devise a plan for getting the money back for a game that is not even close to being worth the amount that was paid for it...

—Robert Wilson

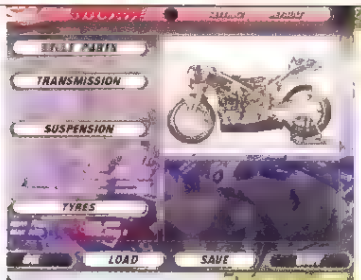
Well, I've had it with this one... I thought it would be a lot more fun than it turned out to be.

—Shane Hewitt

Some of us have installed the game, try to run it and get nothing, nada, zip. No game. Just a few seconds of "here we go" time before your desktop looks exactly the same as it just did.

—Bullwinkle

Discuss the game at [illegible]



[top] The setup screen is simple, but comprehensive

[bottom] The helmet view is a trifle disorienting at first, but it works extremely well

SUPERBIKE WORLD CHAMPIONSHIP

GENRE Racing

PUBLISHER EA Sports

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98, 4X CD-ROM, 166 MHz Pentium or higher, 32MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM

MULTIPLAYER 2-8 players, Internet, LAN, modem, serial

RATING ★★★★½

UPSIDE

Good graphics and better physics modeling than anything else on the market...

DOWNSIDE

... but they don't go quite far enough. How about weather, brake and control options?

Superbike World Championship

Although motorcycle games are nothing new, at best none of them have ever been more than glorified arcade games. At best you get primitive driving models, and at worst you have games like *Road Rash* that reinforce the *busozoku* ("hooligan biker") stereotype.

Out of this bleak scene comes a rescue team from a very unlikely origin. The developer of *Screamer* has produced *Superbike World Championship*, the first motorcycle racing game worthy of being called a simulation.

The game doesn't strike you with a dazzling first impression. The tracks are nicely done, but are barely on par with current F1 sims. The audio is merely acceptable, with motorcycle sounds that are very synthetic. In play, though, the details emerge. The default "helmet cam" view takes a little getting used to, but it authentically imitates the view through the rider's eyes as he moves around the bike, though it still can't properly simulate peripheral vision.

When it comes to the physics model, the game doesn't just get its feet wet, it splashes around quite happily in the shallow end of the pool. Players can tweak a sizeable variety of options to tune for the track (if only by coarse amounts), and on full realism things can get pretty wild. Unlike typical motorcycle games, you have most of the potential hazards accounted for—"low side" slide outs, grueling "high side" flips, wheelies, stoppies, and so on. Although it takes a little while to adapt to the quirky handling and controls, the basse eventually fades to a dim memory once you find your groove and get drawn into the experience.

Although the game properly models the ill effects of cretinous driving, some areas still need work. Wet weather hardly affects your lap times at all, and brakes magically retard themselves during cornering or low-traction conditions. The game also desperately needs a better suite of options to finely tune the steering response (and to turn off the irritating force feedback support).

While there's plenty of room for improvement, *Superbike World Championship* delivers a profoundly unique racing experience. With a healthy imagination and a bit of body English, it yields the best two-wheeled suspension of disbelief outside a set of scraped leathers.

—Neil Mouneimne

If you have the CPU horsepower, you can run a race with the full grid

Devoted monk.
Servant of the light.
Walks through the valley of death with a broadsword.
Charismatic faith healer whose personal charm wields enormous power.
Sought out for his wisdom and loving kindness.
Held in reverence by all who cross his path.
Dogmatic about saving souls from the dragon and the devil.
Greatest triumph: releasing an entire village from an evil spell.
Once slayed 30 lizardmen. And it was good.
Vow of celibacy tested daily due to the effect his otherworldly sex appeal has on the womenfolk.

DARKSTONE

UPSIDE

Sophisticated yet simple, room for growth, flyable bombers

DOWNSIDE

No campaign, niggling problems, flight model weirdness

Fighter Squadron

A sheep in wolf's clothing

Among flight-sim developers, Parsoft is something of a wild card. At a time when many in the development community thought that realistic flight models were just too much for computer gamers, the company developed a series of A-10 Warthog simulations that broke all the rules. Not only did they sport flight models that were far more "alive" and responsive than anything else available, they were simple and satisfying to learn. Thus, even in a sea of WWII-era products, many of the flight-sim faithful eagerly looked forward to the company's newest project, *Fighter Squadron: The Screamin' Demons Over Europe*. Where *A-10 Cuba!* and its brethren had nearly universal appeal, *Fighter Squadron* drifts far into the "action gaming" end of the scale. It's a bit of a conundrum—an Olympic gymnast that trips over its own feet.

Like *European Air War*, the artists deserve kudos for keeping the look between the aircraft and terrain wonderfully consistent. The 3D models in the game are among the best in the business, whether it's the contours of the aircraft or the rolling slopes of the terrain. Nowhere else will you find clouds that seem so real. The problem is that the terrain maps are extremely small, clipping errors are quite prevalent, the aircraft only show gross damage, and the 3Dfx Glide renderer has a penchant for crashing and running in the wrong resolution.

In the air, *Fighter Squadron* without a doubt has the most sophisticated arcade flight model ever seen. Everything moves with a grace and fluidity that hints at the mathematical detailing underneath. This attention to detail can be staggering. Wings flex under load, sections of the plane flutter to the ground when shot off, and bent or damaged landing gear are a tricky challenge to land on.

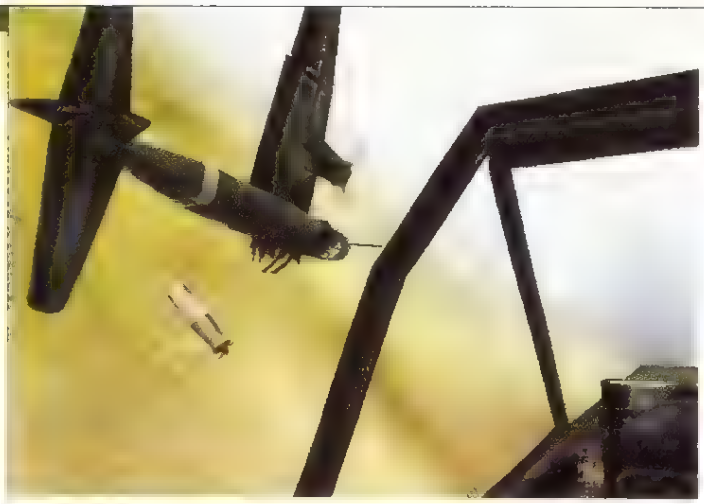
But something went terribly wrong for players that take claims of realism seriously. Stalls and spins are almost impossible to get into. In fact, you can fly like a total cretin, virtually ignoring your energy state and shoving the stick around wildly without any undue effects. Furthermore, the engines are extremely overpowered. For example, a P-38 loaded with bombs could take off with about one-third throttle. Perhaps this is why engine torque pulls so hard to the left (even on twin-engine fighters) on takeoffs and high-G blackouts occur with hardly any effort. At the business end, most aircraft fire their machine guns at cyclic rates of about half their historical speed. This problem causes the simulated Mosquito to blaze away with all eight guns nonstop for almost two minutes before running out. That changes the nature of guns combat completely.

Bombers have their own unique set of problems. They may be finely detailed and nicely modeled, but the interface for accessing individual guns and engines is impractical in the extreme. The Lilliputian manual claims that the provided bombsights are "immobile CCIP sights"—an oxymoron and at least a couple decades early if it were even true. In fact they are nothing but dead-reckoning crosshairs painted on a window. No effort at all was put in to make the bombsights behave remotely like the precision instruments of the day. Such as they are, highly imperfect bombers are far better than no bombers at all.

While the game is riddled with niggling problems and limitations, it's still plenty of fun if you overlook these issues. The padlock does an excellent job at keeping you oriented and on your target during a fight, the map is a triumph of simple interface design, force feedback support is good, multiplayer play is almost effortless, and the game is designed to accept third-party expansions, much like *Combat Flight Simulator*. Finally, collision detection and damage modeling are extraordinary, although it's clear that damage works in a very linear, cumulative fashion. You often wonder, "How many hit points do I have left?"

So what exactly is *Fighter Squadron*? It's not much of a historical simulation. Moreover, there is no campaign or ultimate goal to give solo players much of a sense of continuity or achievement. However, seen through the eyes of a casual player looking for a quick fix, *Fighter Squadron* is an excellent choice. Simple to learn, with small, manageable missions, good multiplayer support, and much more realism than casual players normally expect, it's the "Cracker Jack" of the WWII genre—great as a snack, but not much of a meal.

—Neil Mouneimne



The damage modeling is quite comprehensive, as the pilot of this Ju-88 is about to find out

THE BUZZ

Parsoft went too far in trying to create the combat pilot feel.
—Steffan Strandberg

The more I play it the more I like it. I programmed my Wingman Force to handle some of the odd key combinations. I absolutely love the terrain model and I think it's the best yet.
—Les Haddix

Too bad the designers didn't spend as much time working on the ergonomics of combat flight in a sim as they did on the eye candy details.
—Mike Savage

[top] Wide angle views give you the change to boost your peripheral vision when you need it most

[bottom] Clouds that actually look like clouds

Textures may be soft, but the models are finely detailed

[top] Tweaked the landing gear again

[bottom] Shades of classic gun-camera footage

FIGHTER SQUADRON

GENRE Flight Simulation

PUBLISHER Activision

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98, 266MHz Pentium II or higher, 32MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM

MULTIPLAYER 2-8 players, Internet, LAN

RATING ★★★½

NASCAR Revolution

Over time, racing games have generally stratified themselves into two levels—outrageous action games and simulations w th razor-thin margins of control *NASCAR Revolution* is designed to sh.ft the balance of your attent on from battling physics to battling the competition. Done properly, it cou d appeal to a wide variety of gamers

In typ.cal EA tradition the game sports a slick presentation. Cars are well formed, detailed, and extremely glossy. They show many levels of damage, even sporting functional roof f aps and the occasional body pane donuts. The race line is appropriately faint on the stra ght-aways and dark n the turns. Skid marks decorate the track long after be ng laid down, and contact with the wa l leaves splotches of paint here and there

The problem is that the game wi l suck down just about any kind of computing iron that you can throw at t without batting an eye. Ignore the stated requirements—nothing ess than a 300MHz machine w th a high-end 3D card wi l do Even then 3dfx users p aying the Glide version of the game will suffer terrible performance losses for some reason, wh le the in-car view bogs down the framerate severely in either vers on of the game

Many aspects of the game were clear y designed to make .t accessible, yet the nterface has a severe split-personality disorder. Menu screens and the "Car Setup" menu are certain to be a source of colorfu anguage in the home. The engine sound system attempts to mathematically model a racing V8, and despite its flex bi ity .t still sounds qu te artificial. In the voice department, Bob Jenk ns and Benny Parsons offer plenty of running commentary but there's too much repet t ve fi ler material and not enough useful race nformat on

NASCAR REVOLUTION

GENRE Racing

PUBLISHER EA Sports

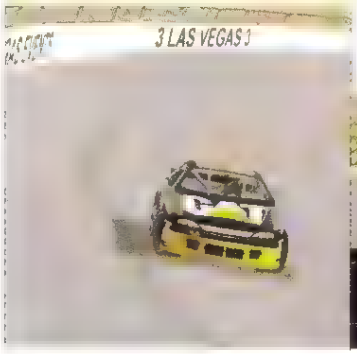
REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98, 200MHz Pentium or higher, 32MB of RAM, 8X CD-ROM, 3D Accelerator

MULTIPLAYER 2-8 players, LAN, modem, serial

RATING ★★

UPSIDE

Sporadically entertaining, good presentation



The replay feature is nice, but replays are much too short

DOWNSIDE

Interface from hell, bizarre physics

Telemetry intuitive enough for everyone in the family

Sadly, the boasts of an advanced physics model and hard-core appeal are at best laughab e. The cars handling only works right in a narrow range of conditions, exhibiting severe front-end push, virtua ly no oversteer at all, weak brakes and ineffectual throttle modulat on Throw in a use ess spotter, malfunctioning auto tranny, unrealistic effects from setup tuning, ridicu ous imp ementation of the yellow flag and far too many crashes from other cars and what you get is pure how - ing-at-the-moon frustration

The rea.ly annoying part is that in some cases, on some of the tracks, all the planets fa.l into a ignment and you really can experience what the design team was trying to achieve. W th some additiona refinement, this could have been the ult mate NASCAR action game or entry-leve sim. *NASCAR Revolution* simp y falls short of the goal, ending up merely an incons stent car cature of stock-car racing

—*Nell Mouneimne*

Ravishing sorceress.
36-22-34.
Intuitive, intelligent, and deadly.
Perfect physical specimen.
Legs inspire lust in knights, rogues, and warriors.
Uses powers for good, not evil.
Rebukes all suitors.
Harnesses magic energy through communion.
Will morph into a werewolf if provoked.
Interests include decoding secret messages and experimenting with arcane spells.
Meditation promotes luminous complexion.
Maintains girlish figure with daily swordplay.

DARKSTONE

www.godgames.com
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North vs. South

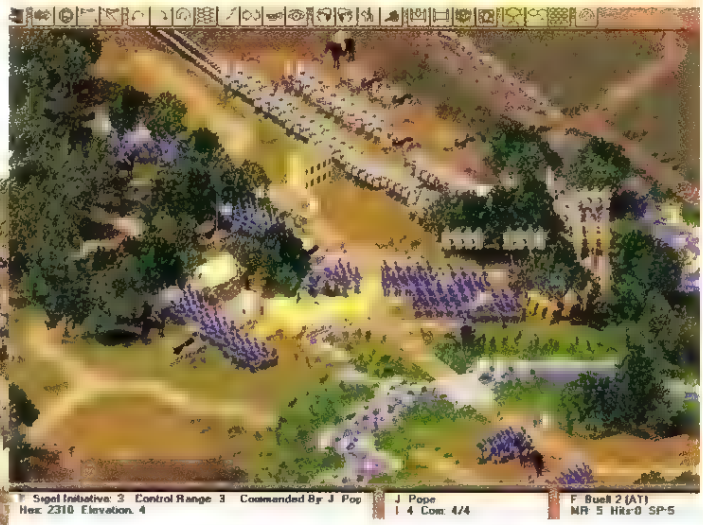
The American Civil War never looked so good

UPSIDE

Excellent graphics, polished wargame system

DOWNSIDE

There's nothing particularly ground-breaking here



[above] Rebel troops defend a rail line at the 2nd Battle of Bull Run

[left] A cavalry melee in progress. Note the aggressive use of pistols

North vs. South, Interactive Magic's latest entry in the relatively crowded field of tactical Civil War games, is notable on several counts: it is the fourth title in the popular *Great Battles of History* series, the first digital adaptation of the design for the gunpowder age, the first title to be designed by someone other than the series' creators, and will probably be the last in the series.

Until now, *Great Battles of History* has been set in the ancient era, detailing the exploits of Alexander the Great, Hannibal and Caesar. Originally designed as boardgames, the series is regarded as the last word in ancient-era tactical wargames. This time around though, developer S. Craig Taylor (a heavyweight designer in his own right) has done the design work himself, attempting to update the system to the 19th Century.

Although the series is turn-based, a unique impulse system was used for the earlier games with leaders randomly activated based on their quality. Once activated, leaders issue a number of commands to their troops equal to their rating. They might even get momentum, enabling them to go up to three times in a row. The result was a great deal of uncertainty for a turn-based wargame.

In *North vs. South*, a heavily-modified version of the impulse system is used. Now army commanders' ratings are used to determine the number of impulses per turn, starting the festivities by issuing orders to individual units, and using one order to activate a subordinate who issues all his orders except one, and so on.

This system can demand plenty of player discipline. Because only one chain of subordinates can be ordered during the impulse, the tendency is to activate those units engaged in combat repeatedly instead of bringing up reserves—with fatal results. Determining the chain of command can also be difficult because the leaders' names are often trimmed off in the informational windows. The new command system is not quite as elegant as that of the earlier games, but reflects the period well enough.

North vs. South places the same emphasis on morale loss rather than manpower losses, but does away with the intricate weapons superiority tables of the earlier games. Melee is now a much more chancy affair, although plenty of attention is paid to fire combat and the various types of muskets and cannons that marked the era.

The lack of strength point losses from combat may disappoint some, but each strength point represents 250 men and routed units that fail to rally are destroyed, so overall casualty rates seem accurate. Besides, the game's focus is on army command and tracking strength point losses is more appropriate than for a game with a more tactical scale.

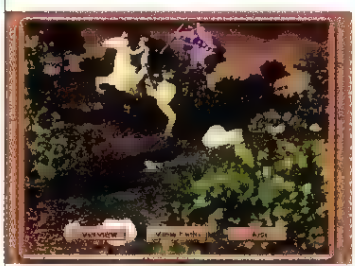
Many gamers complained about the animation in the earlier games, saying the movements were stiff and that the figures resembled cardboard cut outs. This is one area where (despite a few minor bugs) *North vs. South* clearly outshines its ancestors with mesmerizing combat animations.

Another welcome addition is a scenario/map editor like one that ancients gamers had to purchase in a collector's addition. Although it is not the best editor around, it does allow players to modify existing scenarios—something the ancients editor cannot do.

The other games suffered from truly awful campaigns that were no more than scenarios strung together with no influence on each other. *North vs. South* comes with what the box calls a "ground-breaking dynamic campaign," but it is still just scenarios strung together. The difference is that victories at some battles create a choice of what battle to fight next. Some battles can be missed altogether; some might be fought more than once. The objective is to occupy the opponent's capitol, which can be done in as few as five games by the Confederates.

The game's AI can be intimidating to a novice, largely because it is possible to destroy your own army by maneuver. But once maneuvering is mastered, it's best to play the Union because the Confederacy's superior generals can dance all over the bluecoats.

North vs. South features complete fog of war where nothing about a unit is revealed that is not visible. Even the terrain is obscured unless in line of sight. The game comes with 10 scenarios (each with one or several variants) and plenty of historical commentary both in the manual and online. Although there is nothing ground breaking in *North vs. South*, it is a solid addition to a great series—a must-have for Civil War enthusiasts and fans of the game system. —*Willie Albright*



A sight to gladden the heart of any would-be Lee or Jackson

Lee with his army at Antietam. Even the AI Lee is a formidable foe

NORTH VS. SOUTH
INTERACTIVE MAGIC

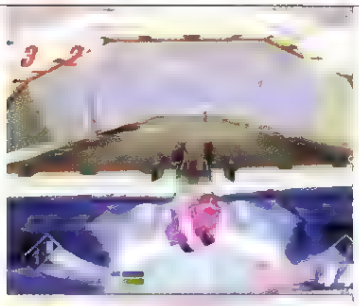
GENRE Strategy

PUBLISHER Interactive Magic

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95, 166MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM

MULTIPLAYER 2 players, Internet, LAN, modem

RATING ★★★½☆



[top] Rear-firing rockets, perfect for pesky tailgaters

[bottom] Cole never passes on the outside

Extreme-G 2

VERDICT

Speed, speed and more speed. Shows off your new 3D card.

DOWNSIDE

If you've seen one of these types of games...

EXTREME-G

GENRE Action Racing

PUBLISHER Acclaim

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98, 200MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM, 3D Accelerator

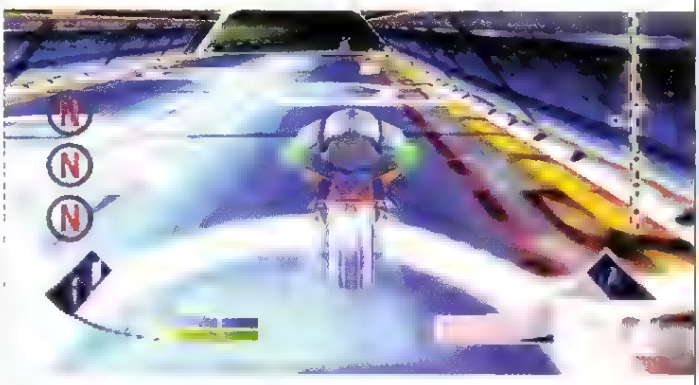
MULTIPLAYER None

RATING ★★★

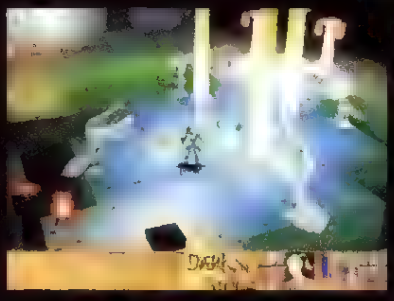
A certain peculiar subgenre of racing games has come into its own lately. Call it "quicksilver racing"; it involves a Tylenol-shaped craft hurtling at fantastic speeds down greased futuristic tracks while techno pounds in the background. *Wipeout XL* was the first game to really get it right on the PC, and now *Extreme-G 2* is making a bid for the title. *XG2*, as they call it, isn't messing with the basics of the formula, it's just offering more of it, in every way possible. More speed (you can now break the sound barrier), more cars, more tracks, more weapons, more techno, more 3D effects—and we did mention more speed?

Speed is what this game is all about. Yes, there are weapons, but in practice they're often incidental. You can only carry one "special" a time, and your default machine guns are pretty ineffectual. (There is a battle training mode, in which you shoot drones for practice and the race itself is incidental.) The speed often reaches Dramamine levels, which can make staying on the "road" a great challenge. Fortunately—or unfortunately, depending on your point of view—*XG2* bends over backwards to make things easier for you. Slam into a barrier at twelve billion miles per hour and your vehicle considerately noses its way in the right direction, somehow managing to scrape up some momentum to keep it going. Run a gauntlet of impossible-looking jumps only to discover that they're really quite manageable.

The game puts the focus squarely on fun, which is not such a bad place for the focus to be. The large number of tracks (40, including multiple paths in the same course) and bikes (12) give *XG2* a fair amount of replayability, although you shouldn't expect countless hours of diversion—multiplayer options would help in that department. There's nothing groundbreaking here, but there's lots of respectable tweaking. If you liked the light-cycle scene from *Tron* and you don't already own *Wipeout XL*, *XG2* is a safe bet. —*John Altman*



If the speed doesn't make you sick, the color scheme might



•Fully 3-D characters and environment

•Simultaneous control of 2 characters

•Random Quest Generator ensures maximum playability

•Manual camera control allows you to rotate 360 degrees and zoom in and out

•100 different enemies based on 30 different characters

•22 weapons and 32 spells

•Supports multi-player mode

Developed by Delphine Software Inc.

Bid farewell to your former self.

Enter the world of Darkstone and leave your identity at the door. Surviving this medieval world, living under the shadow of a nefarious dragon, will require nothing less than a complete transformation. As a knight, monk, thief, or sorcerer, you will creep through dungeons, explore towns and wilderness, and slay armies of nasty enemies on your quest to collect the seven orbs that can defeat your firebreathing nemesis. Look deep inside yourself. Is there a dragon slayer within?

DARKSTONE

UPSIDE Makes an already good game better

DOWNSIDE Some of the new stuff is less than inspired

Rainbow Six: Eagle Watch

Eagle Watch, the expansion for *Rainbow Six*, has only five new single player levels, but don't let that fool you. These levels are big, spectacular, replayable, and stocked with more than the usual numbers of terrorists—"tangos" to the initiated. While the levels in the original game were archetypes of the places we've seen in movies (an amusement park, a ship, a skyscraper), *Eagle Watch* is a short tour of famous landmarks such as Taj Mahal, Big Ben and the space shuttle. And this time, the levels are mercifully free of a ponderous Clancy-fied storyline. Instead, it's a picaresque handful of episodes. SWAT Goes Globetrotting.

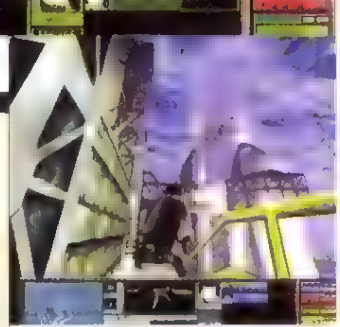
With the Full Watch option, you can do the planning and leave the execution to the computer, watching your scheme unfold. This effectively transforms *Rainbow Six* into a full-fledged strategy game. Unfortunately, this excellent feature won't work with the original levels.

The new weapons are no big whoop. Yawn at the addition of four new characters and shake your head in disbelief that Red Storm still can't be bothered to make a good manual. But brace yourself for some great new multiplayer modes and especially the new training modes and maps. *Rainbow Six* was already a unique addition to multiplayer first person shooters, a refreshing twist on running and gunning. Now it's even better with a great capture the flag variation and even more team game options. The Hunt training mode, which drops you in a tango-thick level and challenges you to take out as many as you can *a la* John McClane, is perfect for score-obsessed players who want to collect all thirty. The City Street map is hands down one of the best multiplayer maps you'll have the pleasure of learning. It's a deceptively simple studio backlot with tunnels threading beneath it and plenty of windows and hiding places.

The enemy AI is still a little wonky in places, standing around dumbly at inappropriate times. It relies on superior numbers and uncanny instant accuracy to present a challenge. But the friendly AI is noticeably smarter. Your men aren't just doorstops and hallclogs anymore: they'll spot tangos you didn't see and rack up their own kills this time around.

This expansion pack adds more than its twenty bucks' worth to *Rainbow Six*, which is every bit as good as *Thief* and *Half Life*. *Eagle Watch* further secures its place in the vanguard of the first person shooter renaissance. —*Tom Chick*

Blue Team poses for the Rainbow Six album cover



Please don't shoot at the space shuttle

EAGLE WATCH

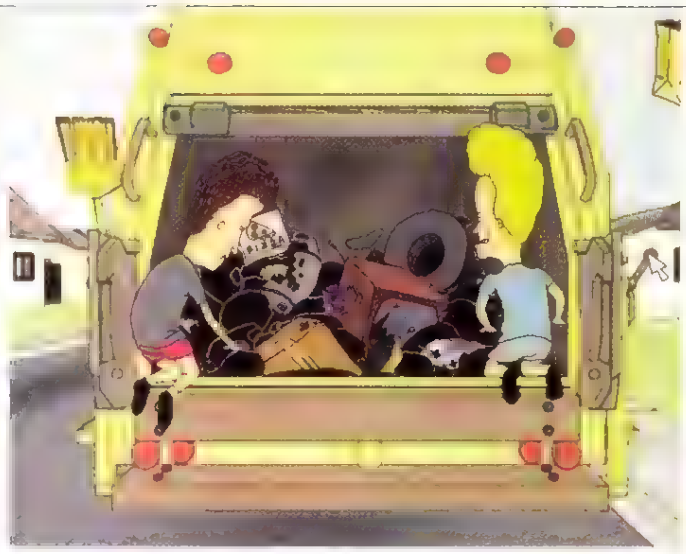
GENRE Action/Strategy

PUBLISHER Red Storm Entertainment

REQUIREMENTS Rainbow Six

MULTIPLAYER 2-8 players, TCP/IP

RATING ★★★★



Garbage. Cool

UPSIDE Uh, huh huh

DOWNSIDE Uh, this like, uh, sucks

Beavis and Butt-head Do U

Beavis and Butt-Head are stupid. Nobody could argue that. But at their best, when buoyed by intelligent writing, they are funny in a smart way—the joke is on them. The better episodes of the TV show accomplish this, as did much of the game *Beavis and Butt-head in Virtual Stupidity*. Unfortunately, the new (value-priced) adventure game *Beavis & Butt-head Do U* fails to make the grade. This is a stupid game about stupid characters, which lacks the wit, not to mention the clever game design, that could make it more.

A field trip to the local college, Highland State, provides the grist for this tale of breaking things and trying to get laid by "college sluts." Our protagonists must explore the campus and get eight locations signed off on a score card; they'll then be able to attend a party and, hopefully, get laid by "college sluts." The phrase "college sluts," as one can clearly see, loses humor with repetition. At each location—dorms, the radio station, the biology lab, the art studio, and so forth—Beavis and Butt-head run into rather predictable problems which complicate getting the signature they need. At the dorm, for example, they are told to return a dress to a co-ed. Instead they throw it in the garbage. Then they see that the co-ed is a "college slut," so they try to rescue the dress. But it's filthy. Before they can launder it, they need to get change for the washing machine. Et cetera. Each challenge follows a similar series of manufactured headaches; and you can see them coming from miles away.

Can't we all just get along?

Although Mike Judge provides the voices, the writing lacks spark. And Beavis and Butt-head are wearisome when you're exposed to too much of them, their presence needs to be broken up by video clips (as their relatively worthy feature-length movie proved). Only the hardest of the hard-core fans need bother with *Do U*. Everybody else would do better catching some reruns on MTV. —*John Altman*

BEAVIS AND BUTT-HEAD DO U

GENRE Adventure

PUBLISHER GT Interactive

REQUIREMENTS Windows 95/98, 133 MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM.

MULTIPLAYER none

RATING ★½

For years, gamers on tight budgets have had to resort to buying their PCs from the huge, impersonal business system manufacturers that don't know jack about gaming.

Glad that's over with.

Talon

An aggressive new gaming system by Falcon Northwest with guts by 3dfx. Priced to move.

Summer '99

Falcon Northwest

www.falcon-nw.com

3dfx

Talk to us *pleeeeeeeeeeease.*

Send all correspondence to: editor@cdmag.com

Letters may be edited for space considerations.

Warm beer

Thank you for the excellent article by Cindy Yans in your April issue. Her comments in "A race for the finish" were most humorous and memorable. The progression from week one to week four of game play resorting to Tylenol, engendering hostility in family, dining on cheetos and warm beer—truly hilarious commentary! I have copied the article for distribution to my family.

The immersive nature of these games, along with their depth, length and quality, has indeed caused some conflict in the households of many in our community. Although these problems can be real, they are not insurmountable, nor should they prevent the participation in, or enjoyment of, these treasures.

It is my opinion that the best of the best games (such as *Baldur's Gate*) represent the creative genius of an entire generation of new artists and performers, in what is the most powerful and complex form of interactive entertainment on the planet.

Thank you for this opportunity to express my gratitude for a job well done.

Rod Sanden, M.D.

Department of "Huh?"

Yes, indeed. I sit in this basement, this dark, dank basement, day after day. The little work I accomplish is all in vain, and alas the bulk of my free time is spent here, at a desk, in front of a computer, surrounded by empty cans that weeks before were filled with various liquids, potable and otherwise.

And what have I got? Well, sure I do have this desk. Sure, I do have this computer. And I admit, the computer is fairly well-equipped with some high-tech gadgetry. But is something missing? Must I spend my free time writing letters to random people (and *Computer Games Strategy Plus*—subscribe today!) and drinking from cans with labels long gone?

"What a loser!" You must be thinking. "I mean, I've seen losers in my life, but this one certainly takes the cake". You probably will show this letter to you friend, and he/she will say, "My Lord, that's the second biggest loser I've ever read an e-mail from!"

So, in summation: will free games help? Maybe just a discount? Medical help? Posting in our "Rebound" sect on? Perhaps, a quick and painless delete of the letter? Nothing at all? The choice, my friends, is up to you.

I apologize for having an AOL account, it was forced upon me.

RabbiBlack

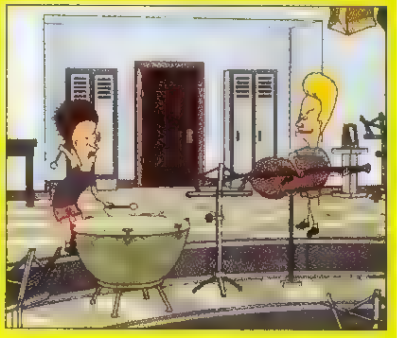
Font fun

I åm µñÐêr þåñt ñðmê åñÐ ï hâvê åŧŧ ýðµr µñÐêr þåñt ïñ mý ßµttêr Mý çðµïñ ï thê µñåßðmßêr ð Ï Whåt ÝØµ Tð TÅŧk têvê ÇÅê Frðm åðŧ Tð ŧêt mê hâvê þrðg ØÑE MØRE REQÛT FØR ÝØÛ TØ HÅVË MØRÈ ÇHÈÅT ÍÑ ÝØÛR MÅG

NiTROJoKeR

Wouldn't you know—this came from an AOL account.

Compulsive obsessive disorder



[Note: These were all sent as individual e-mails]

Send me free stuff and if you dont I will have a tamper tandrum.

A tamper tandrum? Sounds painful.

You should put pics of Skaarjwarriors from *Unreal* all over the next issue. Make them horny and sexy. Naked is possible. Send me the naked ones too. Pleeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeease. If you don't, i wont subscribe again.

OK, this is officially the last time we'll print any "horny and sexy" letters. We mean it.

I want you guys to dedicate an issue of *CGS+* to the game *Beavis & Butthead Do U*! They deserve it and stuff he he.

Uh, huh huh, no.

I realize you must be extremely busy but is there any chance I could get any of the crap I just sent you in your magazine. And can I have the address of that kid haroldo who had rappid monkeys and flying elephants?

Uh, huh huh, no.

I want you to put one of the above letters in your magazine so I can be famous at school. Thanks.

Andy

AOL? You guessed it. But now he's famous. Maybe he'll even get chicks.

ERRATA

Due to an editing error, LucasArts' Joel Dreskin was never identified as the Product Marketing Manager of *The Phantom Menace* in our story *The Phantom Games* [CGS+ 102]. We regret the error.

MECHWARRIOR 2 / SIDEWINDER 3D PRO UPDATE

For all persons who

(1) purchased a bundle containing Activision's MechWarrior 2 game (MS-DOS version) and Microsoft's SideWinder 3D Pro joystick, or

(2) purchased a bundle containing MechWarrior 2 Windows 95 version 1.0 and the SideWinder 3D Pro and have experienced torso twist or throttle limitations when using the SideWinder 3D Pro to play MechWarrior 2

Activision and Microsoft are offering a free CD containing the MechWarrior 2 Windows 95* version 1.1. To obtain your free CD please send your name, address, daytime phone number and proof of purchase (your original receipt, the original bar code from the box or the original MechWarrior 2 Registration (SideWinder 3D Pro Edition) card that came in the box) to:

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A few purchasers of the bundle containing the SideWinder 3D Pro and the MechWarrior 2 MS-DOS version later took advantage of an offer to swap their MS-DOS version for a Windows 95 version (1.0) of MechWarrior 2 at a cost of $14.95. If you took advantage of this offer, your $14.95 will be refunded, plus postage. Use the form below to request a refund. Clip it out and mail to the address above along with your original receipt or a copy of your cancelled check for the swap offer in the amount of $14.95, accompanied by proof that you purchased the bundle (your original receipt for the bundle, the original bar code from your box or your original MechWarrior 2 Registration (SideWinder 3D Pro Edition) card that came in your box).

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*Please note that the CD available through this offer contains a Windows 95 version of the MechWarrior 2 game that has substantial system requirements than the MS-DOS version bundled with the SideWinder 3D Pro.

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The War's Not Over Yet...

Colorblind Top 10 lists

Top 10, not

In your March 1999 issue you printed the Top 10 Selling Games. Then in April you changed it to the (Almost) Real Game Top 10. The more I thought about this the more it bothered me, and I had to write.

These are not the ten best sellers because you took out those under $20 and those that you do not consider games. So what good is a list like this? Is this done just to pump up your friends in the computer industry who can't write a game to outsell *Barbie's Riding Club*? I don't think you are doing your buddies any favors by printing a fantasy list like this. There isn't a developer out there who doesn't wish they had thought of a hunting game before Wizard Works did.

Did you print this list to justify the games you review and cover? Well it is time to admit that you are not writing about games that sell the best, and your appeal is limited to those of us who like to think when we play a game.

Now you should suck up your pride and give GT Interactive/Wizard Works the credit they deserve for making the best selling game the last two years running. Obviously, the thousands of people that have bought and played these games (I am not one of them) would argue with you about these being strategy games.

I challenge you to start reviewing these games that you deleted from the top 20 selling games list and giving them the credit they have earned by whipping the ass of other games in the marketplace.

When you delete those games below $20, you are in effect saying that more expensive games must be better. If this is true, lets re-release *Alien Trilogy* and charge $100 for it, because then it would have to be a great game.

Shemp Howard

Dr. Howard ("Dr. Howard, Dr. Fine") brings up a few good points, though there's no conspiracy. The reason we removed the budget and "non-game" products from the list was because we assumed people would be more interested in how, say, Alpha Centauri at full-price was selling in relation to Half-Life, also at full-price.

But let's keep this in some perspective. The Barbie products are usually aimed at kids, so they shouldn't be included on the "Game" list. And we all realize hunting and budget titles sell a lot of copies, but PC Data bases their list purely on sales, not revenue. If they did, these titles would rarely crack the top 10. (Let's give credit where credit's due—they're cheap to make, so they are making wicked profits.)

And we have reviewed Deer Hunter and Deer Hunter II—the former got 2 stars, the latter 3. Cabela's Big Game Hunter 2 got a 1 star review.

World of color

I just came from Electronic Arts' website looking for the latest patch for *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri* when I discovered a very pleasant surprise—a colorblind palette patch for an already incredibly well thought-out game.

Yes, I am colorblind. Yes, I can see the traffic light signals when I drive. And no, I don't only see in black and white. In fact, the majority of colorblind people see colors. It's just that we perceive them as different colors than the ones non-colorblind people see. *Alpha Centauri* is the first game I've seen that has addressed a vital issue that affects a full ten percent of the male population (which for now make up the majority of gamers) in some form or fashion. I can't begin to count the number of times I've sat at my computer, squinting at the screen in a vain attempt to distinguish the green good guys from the red bad guys, or if that missile dot on my radar screen is above (blue) or below (purple) my beautiful metal gray F-15.

So here's hoping that the software industry follows Alpha Centauri's lead and starts to create colorblind options in their games. It's not an expensive thing to program, and it will sure make the gaming experiences much more enjoyable for the large minority of us colorblind gamers.

Travis "Dental Floss" Hong

Carmageddon lovin'

I have to fully agree with the review of *Carmageddon 2* [*CGS+ 100*]. And yes, it remains very fun for me. Why? Not because I'm a simple-minded drooling gore-a-holic. Well, that too... but the job I just spent the last four and a half months at involved typing and proofing court cases, the vast majority of which being DMV cases from New York City. Frustration rises quickly with those people who, for instance, tell the judge that the state DMV sent them a replacement license, all the while the judge's clerk is tapping keys on a computer, and the judge replies, "No, DMV says they never sent you an original license, in fact," and the motorist is all surprised like, "How could he possibly know?" Or the motorists who appear to be blind and can't notice a "No Left Turn" sign and blame the officer for it.

In any event, this can help a frustrated typist desire carnage of the sort seen in *Carmageddon 2*, specifically when you lust to destroy your opponents. I don't prey on the pedestrians so much, however. Keying in enough fatal accident hearings about people getting torn up by dump trucks leaves you wondering enough as it is.

Sir Charles

>>>

Falcon mistakes

I'm sorry, but you guys were wrong with the text on the front of the April issue. *X-Wing Alliance* doesn't feature the galaxies first ride in the Millenium Falcon. You could fly it in *Rogue Squadron* if you won all of the missions with medals or cheated. And let me tell you, it kicked ass!

Brian Ballard

P.S. Sacred cows do make the tastiest burgers!

OK, you got us. It just sounded cool. We were trying to make a point that all of the other previews were based solely on phone conversations with the team, and didn't include any time spent actually playing the game. —ed

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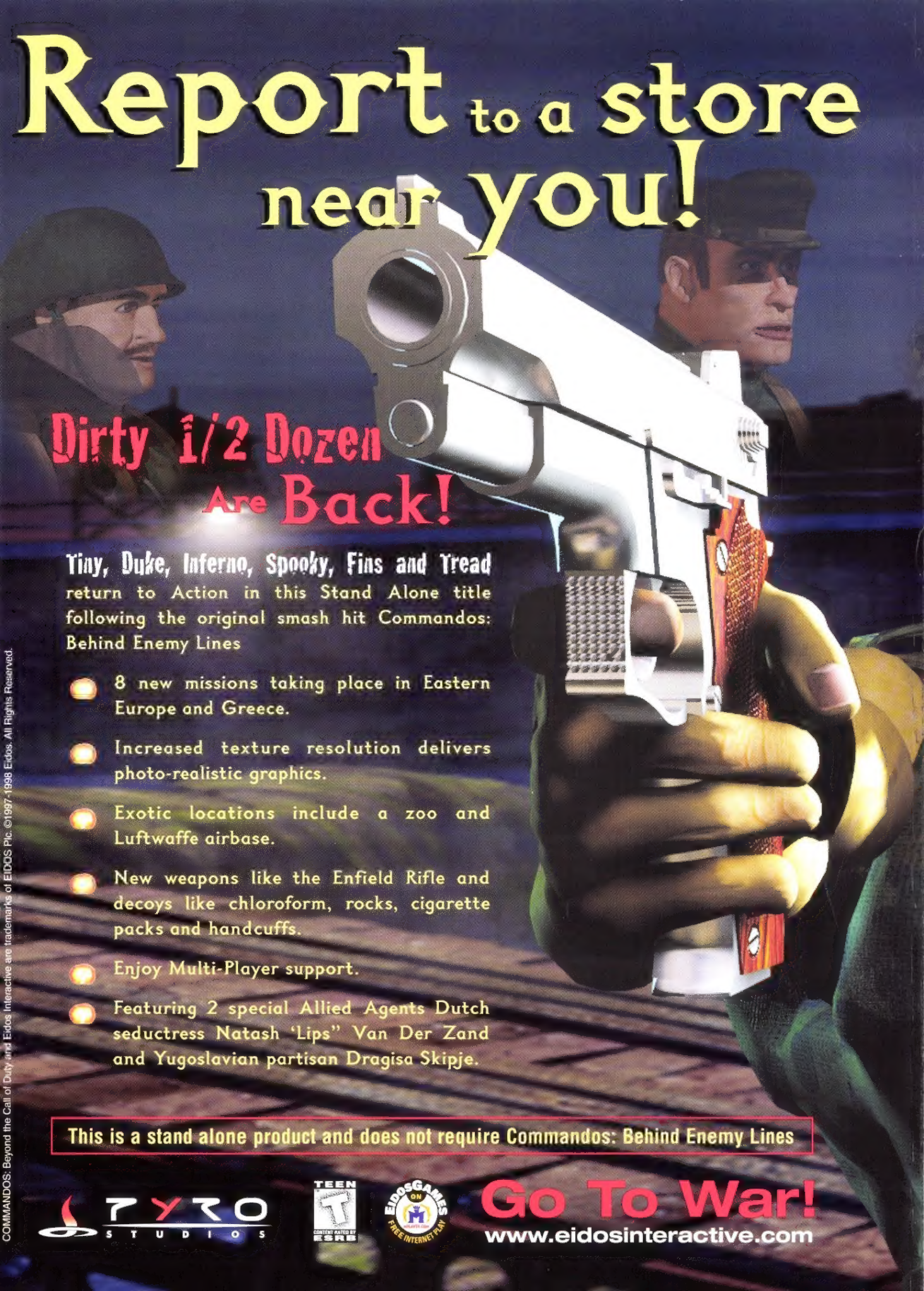

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